

# SAHEL STRATEGY 2020 - 2028



SEARCH FOR  
COMMON GROUND

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## STRATEGIC PLANNING PROCESS

As part of Search for Common Ground (Search)'s organization-wide 10-year Strategic Plan, the Sahel region has been identified as one of the 10 conflict geographies on which Search will focus its efforts over the coming decade. Recognizing the transnational and multidimensional nature of instability in the region, Search has adopted an approach that will shift away from **country-based programs and operations towards one centered around "conflict geographies"**. This executive summary lays out Search's 10-year strategy for engagement in the West African Sahel, with a particular focus on Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso.

## THE CONFLICT GEOGRAPHY

The Sahel region is home to a multitude of violent conflicts. The current **epicenter** of conflict dynamics is the **Liptako-Gourma region and its surrounding areas**, where the borders of Niger, Mali, and Burkina Faso meet. A confluence of factors fueling violence across the Sahel has resulted in the emergence of a number of non-state armed groups and increased militarization concentrated in this region. In recent years there has been a sharp conflagration of inter-communal and extremist violence which shows no signs of abating. The driving factors shaping this conflict's geography reach far beyond the Liptako-Gourma. The armed conflict in the region started in Northern Mali as a result of

the flood of weapons and fighters from Libya and spilled over into Niger and Burkina Faso. The **spillover effects** reverberate across Niger, southern Algeria, and Libya in the Sahara Desert, and all the way through to the littoral states of West Africa.

At the heart of today's conflicts is the delayed peace process in Mali, which has created opportunities for an array of existing armed groups to expand their reach into Western Niger and across the Northern Belt of Burkina Faso. Violent extremism has taken root in the context of a long-standing and more intractable dynamic of sharp divisions between groups, which are exacerbated by land and natural resource conflicts, and have given way to persecution and targeted violence by community-based militias. Additionally, nomadic groups are seeing their herding livelihoods slipping away, fueling grievances towards a state that they perceive as illegitimate and socially absent, making them a fertile ground for the infiltration of violent extremist groups. Development challenges facing the region are also immense and integral to durably addressing the region's multifold problems. In a rapidly deteriorating context, there is an **urgent need to replace top-down and militarized approaches with more inclusive, bottom-up engagement to sustain stabilization and peace efforts.**

Our overall mandate is to transform the way that the world deals with conflict, away from adversarial approaches and towards collaborative solutions. In the region, this requires supporting national and international actors to move **past a state-centric approach to security, justice, and peace** to address the current crisis, recognizing that the state-based security complex perpetuates the conflicts across the Sahel. Search's role is to help communities and civil society actors to transform the conflict dynamics that shape the region, ultimately enabling efforts to modernize the economy and strengthen livelihoods to be successful. However, our strategy also recognizes the need to go **beyond a resilience approach** that has been a dominant framework for development in the region. Rather, it focuses on leveraging key ongoing processes to cause vertical and horizontal social cohesion, targeting those parts of the conflict geography which are particularly

crucial for long-term peace. Critical to this will be **working at the intersection of peacebuilding, humanitarian assistance, and economic development**, in order to most effectively capitalize on the region's assets for peace and address sources of instability. This directly builds on Search's expertise in conflict resolution and presence in the Sahel since 2011, and drives us to develop or strengthen partnerships with organizations outside of the peacebuilding space.

# STRATEGIC OBJECTIVES

The strategy will focus on **five interrelated key objectives** that address salient factors of the conflict system, and to which Search is well positioned to substantially contribute:

- Strengthen social and economic interdependence across dividing lines
- Advance equitable and inclusive management of land and water resources
- Transform the way that states respond to security threats so that they collaborate with local stakeholders to address the root causes of conflict
- Strengthen inclusive governance and improve equitable access to public services
- Create conditions for the success of an inclusive political settlement to the conflict in Mali

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## TO STRENGTHEN SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC INTERDEPENDENCE ACROSS DIVIDING LINES

Inter-communal tension, which has long been a defining (and unaddressed) feature of conflict in the Sahel, has resulted in entrenched ethnic divisions, increased identity politics, and a cycle of violence which threatens to spin out of control. This includes large-scale violence which some analysts believe rises to the level of ethnic cleansing.

Search will employ both a short-term and a long-term strategy, focused on Central Mali, Western Niger, and Northern Burkina Faso. In the near-term, Search will prevent further escalation of violence and mass atrocities while laying the foundations for long-term interdependent relationships among people from different groups. Because ethnic-based conflict in the Sahel is so deeply linked to livelihoods, our work will, in part, focus on demonstrating how relationships across dividing lines can lead to livelihood dividends —by building economic linkages between farmers and herders, strengthening local-level trade, and opening the value chain on key market segments.

### SUB-OBJECTIVES

- **Leveraging the role played by traditional stakeholders** involved in existing local dispute mechanisms and supporting their ability to sustain peacebuilding efforts
- **Fostering interdependent relationships** among people from different ethnic groups
- **Creating readiness** among those in divided communities at all levels so that there is acceptance and normalization of economic relationships

- **Solidifying inter-ethnic relationships** by emphasizing the positive relationship between improved collaboration across divides and improved livelihoods and local trade

### KEY DRIVING FACTOR OF CONFLICT

Divisions between and within groups are increasingly entrenched and there is a risk that the ongoing “inter-communal” conflicts could metastasize into broad identity-based conflict

## GEOGRAPHIC FOCUS

Region-wide, with a focus on areas with the highest risk of mass-atrocities, such as where farming and pastoralism overlap and where resources are contested

## KEY MEASURE(S)

Favorable perceptions of those ethnic groups which are most at risk; Demonstrated inter-group collaboration on economic matters, improved regulation, and more equal sharing of available resources; Linkages between inter-group cooperation and micro-economic prosperity are proven

## FOUR PROGRAMMATIC APPROACHES

- Through **community-based dialogue** and **media**
- The **inclusion of marginalized communities from the peripheries** (in partnership with governments)
- The development of **livelihood creation** and **economic**

**development activities** across ethnic divides which explicitly foster interdependence

- **Empowerment of local stakeholders** involved in local dispute mechanisms to sustain peacebuilding efforts

## INCREMENTAL CHANGES

For the first two years, Search will focus on breaking the cycle of retaliation which has come to dominate the conflict. It will use a constructive approach of social cohesion and conflict sensitivity. In the medium-term (five years), its efforts will focus on developing instances of inter-ethnic cooperation. That, by popularizing the notion of collaboration and identifying opportunities for economic and inter-group cooperation. By ten years, Search is expecting two main results : proven increase of economic well-being, and norms established that inter-group economic cooperation brings prosperity

## TO CATALYZE EQUITABLE AND INCLUSIVE MANAGEMENT OF LAND AND WATER RESOURCES

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Competition over natural resources, particularly land and water access, is a key root cause of conflict across the Sahel. While complex natural resource management schemes have existed since the Macina Empire of the 1800s, the legal regimes and customary or traditional mechanisms to manage related disputes have been unable to cope with the stressors created by population growth, climate change, and increased demand for animal products. They have also struggled to create cross-border connections or effective resource trade between capitals and periphery areas. In addition, a lack of regulation over resources and corruption of local power holders contribute to tensions due to unequal distribution of resources. Work under this strategic objective will focus largely on improving policy on equitable and sustainable land management and incorporating conflict sensitivity into government, agribusiness, and mining practices. This will be done by inculcating the Common Ground Approach into land management reform efforts (reforms of the Rural Code, for instance), streng-

thening accountability of land conflict management mechanisms, and linking local actors —particularly youth, women, and traditional elders— to nationally driven processes in all countries.

## SUB-OBJECTIVES

- **Policy**, to equip all actors with the information on the legal parameters for governing natural resources
- **Resource management**, to transform the management of land from national to local levels
- **Conflict sensitivity**, to mainstream conflict sensitivity into government and private sector development policies, especially agribusinesses

## KEY DRIVING FACTOR OF CONFLICT

Land-based and natural resource-based conflicts are at the root of local grievances, driving violence across the conflict geography, and traditional and legal mechanisms have failed to respond effectively

## GEOGRAPHIC FOCUS

Places where there is current local conflict, more precisely at the belt across the region where disputes between farmers and herders have increased, but also on areas where extractive industries are active

## KEY MEASURES

Levels of trust that land and natural resources are administered justly; % of land and resource conflicts resolved without violence; # of collaborative efforts to utilize natural resources; Level of harmonization between statutory and customary land law

## FIVE PROGRAMMATIC APPROACHES

Addressing land and resources-base disputes

- Increase public and decisionmaker access to relevant information
- Localize dispute resolution mechanisms and increase access to justice
- Amplify local voices into policy decisions, especially those stemming from women and youth-led CSOs
- Establish strategic inter-sectoral relationships
- Bridge the divides between the state, communities, and small mining companies

## INCREMENTAL CHANGES

For the first two years, Search will work with communities to address disputes and increase the utilization of a conflict sensitivity approach. In the midterm (five years), the organization will strengthen collaboration and the establishment of local networks. By ten years, local and traditional institutions will be the primary resolvers of the disputes, the use of land and water resources will be considered equitable across ethnic groups, where a collaborative approach is used to land use for prosperity. The private sector will be one of the drivers for more sustainable and inclusive socio-economic development in the region



## TO TRANSFORM THE WAY THAT STATES RESPOND TO SECURITY THREATS SO THAT THEY COLLABORATE WITH LOCAL STAKEHOLDERS TO ADDRESS THE ROOT CAUSES OF CONFLICT

The proliferation of armed groups, including Al Qaeda in the Islamic Magreb (AQIM) and Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS), has triggered strong-handed responses from security forces across the region. Yet, the prospects for stability depend on security forces having collaborative relationships with communities, based on mutual respect and trust, and together holding human dignity at the center of their actions. Search will leverage its existing cross-border SSR programs and further develop partnerships with key governmental actors in the security and defense sectors and the peace architecture, including the G5 Sahel Permanent Secretariat, as well as international militaries present in the region.

### SUB-OBJECTIVES

- **Increasing trust and collaboration** between security forces and communities
- **Strengthening institutional processes of security forces** so that engagement with communities, human rights organizations, and others is structured and normalized
- **Enabling security forces, civilian government agencies, civil society, and religious leaders to work together** to address threats by tackling the root causes of conflict
- **Facilitating collaboration** between local communities and international military actors to reduce public resentment and build trust

### KEY DRIVING FACTOR OF CONFLICT

A proliferation of increasingly well-armed non-state armed actors, including violent extremist groups with clear affiliations to al Qaeda and ISIS, are escalating the conflicts

### GEOGRAPHIC FOCUS

Region-wide, but concentrated where the proliferation of non-state armed group violence is most prevalent

### KEY MEASURES

Increase in communal trust in state security forces and vice versa; Success of DDR processes; % decrease in violence against civilians, including from security and defense forces; # of new policies in place focused on improving community-security relationships

### THREE PROGRAMMATIC APPROACHES

- Facilitate national and regional working relationships between security forces and non-state actors
- Strengthen relationships between security forces and community members at the local level
- Work with governments to enact policies and institutionalize practices promoting effective security engagement with citizens

### INCREMENTAL CHANGES

In the short term, Search will work on establishing a dialogue between state security forces



and civil society to bridge the trust deficit between them. In the midterm, the organization will work on improving trust between Civil Society and security forces by developing institutional structures for collaboration, and normalizing their engagement with one another. By ten years, we seek the establishment

of collaboration and cohesion between the state security sector and communities. Norms are changed so that there is a legitimate non-violent mechanism and platform to air grievances and challenge the preeminent role of political and security elites in the national security apparatus

## TO STRENGTHEN INCLUSIVE GOVERNANCE AND IMPROVE EQUITABLE ACCESS TO PUBLIC SERVICES

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Long-term peace in the Sahel depends on each government's ability to serve all of its citizens effectively and equitably. All three countries in the geography have road maps to decentralization, yet efforts to reassert service delivery, provide security, and administer justice have been stymied. Establishing a state presence is insufficient to reduce armed group presence; inclusive notions of governance — which engage women, youth, traditionally marginalized communities, and others — is vital to address the grievances which have public traction. Search's efforts will focus on advancing citizens' access to decision-makers and improving state capacities to engage their constituents to jointly address the myriad challenges faced. This will enable partnerships with government and civil society groups at every level.

### SUB-OBJECTIVES

- **Civically engaged population** in working with citizens groups, particularly with media and the increasing proportion of the youth population and women-led organizations
- **Improved responsiveness and accountability from local governments** while incentivizing a more equitable redeployment of national administrations throughout the Sahel
- **Strengthened collaboration between citizens groups and government officials** on developing concrete and enduring mechanisms for service delivery
- **Access to justice** -- Search will address the competition between formal and informal mechanisms of justice

### KEY DRIVING FACTOR OF CONFLICT

There is a conundrum of governance: a lack of state presence enables violent extremists to operate freely, but inequitable governance fuels the grievances of the population

### GEOGRAPHIC FOCUS

Rural areas in which state presence is tenuous, or mistrust in the state is high

### KEY MEASURES

Measure trust in the state in target communities, especially among youth and women ; Improvement in service delivery (education, sanitation, healthcare, etc.) ; Decrease in violence in upcoming elections vs. past

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## THREE PROGRAMMATIC APPROACHES

- Bringing youth and women's voices into decision-making processes
- Ensuring key government processes are equitable and conflict sensitive
- Harnessing the power and influence of local leaders

## INCREMENTAL CHANGES

For the first two years, Search will support mutual trust, communication, and collaboration between security

defense forces (SDF), civilian authorities, and communities. It will also support civic engagement (including women and youth). In five years, the organization will work to increase the presence and legitimacy of state representatives in VE, and support them in the design (with Youth) of inclusive CVE policies. By ten years, Governments will have developed and implemented integrated and inclusive development strategies (including Youth and marginalized groups) on public policies



## 5 TO CREATE CONDITIONS FOR THE SUCCESS OF AN INCLUSIVE POLITICAL SETTLEMENT TO THE CONFLICT IN MALI

While the Algiers Agreement has laid out a roadmap to long-term and enduring peace in Mali and the wider region, implementation has largely stalled, save for some small steps in the DDR process of the Coordination of Azawad Movements (CMA) soldiers. Search's efforts will focus on: engaging communities, especially youth, in envisioning a political settlement process; facilitating the implementation of DDR and reconciliation initiatives; and initiating community involvement in implementing structural reforms in Mali.

### SUB-OBJECTIVES

- **Engage communities**, with a focus on youth engagement, who are perceived to have a stake in the outcome of the process
- **Support the implementation of a successful DDR** and reconciliation process
- **Trigger communities' engagement** in the implementation of structural reforms as envisioned in the peace accord, or any subsequent process

### KEY DRIVING FACTOR OF CONFLICT

Despite the vision for restructuring power and governance, implementation of the Malian Peace Process has not progressed leaving open the window for violence committed by other groups

### GEOGRAPHIC FOCUS

Northern Mali, Central Mali, South and West Mali

## KEY MEASURES

% of target communities who report having been regularly informed and provided with opportunities to voice their perspectives and expectations concerning the ending of armed conflict; % of target community members who report having participated in or promoting the implementation of a peace process

## THREE PROGRAMMATIC APPROACHES

Facilitate vertical integration of any political dialogue process that unfolds

- Strengthen communities' access to information on the evolution of the peace process in whatever form it takes
- Build public constituencies for peace
- Facilitate youth engagement in the peace process (per UNSCR 2250)

## INCREMENTAL CHANGES

In the short term, the implementation of the disarmament and demobilization process as designed in the Algiers Agreements, and accessible public information about the existing peace process. Youth and women emerge as a potent force in Malian society for the peace process. In the first five years, a broader peace process takes place, inclusive and accountable to their constituents. It includes trust and collaboration between security and defense forces, communities, and local and regional authorities. By ten years, Structural changes and policies as provisioned in the peace accord are inclusive and reflect central and northern Malian communities' needs



# KEY DRIVERS AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR PEACE

## **Engagement of youth and women in peace architecture and local governance frameworks:**

Youth and women are often not recognized by their community as key peacebuilders, negatively impacting their action and impact, and maintaining their marginalization. However, youth believe their role as peacebuilders is important, while women demonstrate greater resilience to voluntary recruitment from violent groups

## **The institution of “cousinage” / “parenté à plaisanterie” and its potential to ameliorate the political salience of ethnicity:**

This practice binds families in relations of mutual obligation and respect, and has historically mitigated the effects of identity-based conflicts in the Sahel.

## **Existing local conventions and dispute settlement mechanisms:**

If supported to become more inclusive and in-line with rooted social norms and the role played by traditional leaders, these self-sufficient and accountable structures can be a key vector to link government and community-led efforts to address land management issues and establish mutually agreed enforcement procedures

## **The opportunity to strengthen agro-pastoral economic interdependence:**

Strengthening the supply chains to capitalize on the growing demand will not only boost the pastoral livelihoods, but also help sedentary agriculture communities to grow

## **A history of climate resilient production systems:**

Over the years, Sahelian populations have extended their knowledge on resilient livestock and crop production systems based on exploiting climatic variability, and they have established successful local and national economies; which should be promoted and incorporated into development policy for a more climate resilient future

## **The relative success of the Nigerien peace process offers a blueprint for Mali:**

The latter offers a successful framework for peacebuilding and the integration of former rebels into existing governance structures which might inspire national policies in favor of the defection of other violent extremist-affiliates in the Western part of the country, and in the wider Sahel region

## CAPACITIES

Search has had a presence in the Sahel conflict geography since 2011 and has worked in the epicenter, with a robust presence on the ground. We currently have **over 20 programs in conflict prevention, stabilization, and reconciliation under implementation in the region.** We have a regional office in Dakar, and offices in Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso, with substantial staff presence in each country. Search's programming model, which relies on staff deployment on the ground on a permanent basis, provides us with a **unique ability to rapidly respond in order to prevent or mitigate escalating conflicts, as well as to innovate and scale.** Search has worked in **Niger since 2011** through programming focused on youth engagement and conflict prevention. Since then, our programming has transformed into a multi-faceted set of activity streams focusing on media production and capacity building, supporting fragile communities, engaging youth and women in civil society, local development and peacebuilding, violence prevention, countering violent extremism, reintegration of ex-combatants, security sector engagement, as well as related sub-themes. We have offices in Niamey, Tillabéri, and Diffa, and we worked in most parts of the country.

Search has been working in **Mali since 2014** to strengthen social cohesion and support reconciliation. Our offices are located in Bamako, Mopti, and Gao, and our activities cover all the regions. Our work in community-based mediation, prevention of mass atrocities, education for peace, and security sector engagement have led to the development of a wide set of relationships at the governmental and community levels alike. Search has also set up, trained, and supported networks of hundreds of media professionals and peace ambassadors among women and youth in support of bottom-up engagement of the Peace Agreement. Search has been working in **Burkina Faso since 2011**, mostly through programs empowering youth as agents for peace. Search has set up a permanent office in Ouagadougou since January 2020 and set up sub-offices in the most fragile regions to scale up our presence and launch a series of new programs in the security sector, stabilization, peace education, and conflict analysis, jointly with local and international organizations. Additionally, **Search has several ongoing cross-border programs** in the security, stabilization, and peacebuilding sectors.