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Navigating Aid in Complex Environments. Norway's Sahel Assistance

Briefing Note



Cover photo: Inger A. Haldal

Written by:

Ananda S. Millard, PhD, independent consultant, Javier Fabra-Mata, PhD, and Anette Wilhelmsen, senior advisors at the Department for Evaluation in Norad, with input from Ornella Moderan, independent Sahel researcher, on the basis of the evaluation reports written by Tana. The findings, interpretations, and conclusions presented in this note do not necessarily reflect the views of the Department for Evaluation.

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I. Introduction

Delivering aid effectively in highly complex and volatile environments demands innovative approaches. Drawing mainly on findings from the recently conducted [evaluation of Norway's aid engagement in the Sahel region](#), this briefing note sheds light on challenges and possible strategies to navigate unstable environments.

In recent months, the Sahel region has witnessed significant changes. The evaluation mentioned above, conducted by the Department for Evaluation in Norad, completed its data collection in March 2023 and the report was written in May. By June 2023, we learned that the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) would withdraw from Mali by the end of the year. July 2023 saw another coup in the region, this time in Niger. And as August concluded, news arrived that the Norwegian Embassy in Mali would close down by year's end.

II. Background

Norwegian development aid to the Sahel dates back to the mid-1980s, focusing on food security in Mali and conflict mediation programs. In late 2017, Norway established its embassy in Bamako, assuming responsibility for Mali, Burkina Faso, Mauritania, Chad, and Niger – all five members of then G5 Sahel. This marked a notable shift in Norway's diplomatic representation in the region.

By 2018, Mali and Niger became formal partner countries for Norwegian aid, and the 2018–2020 Strategy for Norway's Efforts in the Sahel Region was launched. Norway is now implementing an updated version of the initial strategy. This revised strategy places significant emphasis on addressing root causes of instability, fostering sustainable development, and promoting inclusivity. Norway's strategic shift acknowledges the Sahel's complex challenges, including poverty, widespread inequality, climate change, and

violent extremism, all of which have regional and global implications.

Norwegian engagement in the Sahel is further underpinned by a comprehensive framework of policy documents, guidelines, and action plans. These encompass key policy documents such as Norway's Humanitarian Strategy (2019), the Strategic Framework for Norway's Engagement in Conflict Prevention, Stabilization, and Resilience Building (2017), and government action plans including Women, Peace, and Security (2018) and Food, People, and the Environment (2019). Norway's strategic approach demonstrates alignment with the challenges inherent to the Sahel region, and the flexibility embedded in its policy framework allows for adaptive responses to changing contexts.

II. Aid Delivery in the Sahel: Strategies, Architecture and Collaboration

The literature on navigating complex environments¹ underscores the significance of several key strategies, including establishing

direct links with recipient populations, conducting comprehensive political economy analyses, and embracing flexible strategies and programming methods. Norway has demonstrated a good foundation to fully implement those strategies in the evolving Sahel context. By effectively leveraging its implementing partners to mitigate operational risks, Norway has showcased its commitment to addressing the multifaceted challenges in the Sahel, mirroring the flexibility outlined in its strategy. The effective delivery of support to the Sahel in the future depends on the reinforcing of these positive elements, preventing the undue legitimisation of unconstitutional regimes, and facilitating the successful implementation of localised aid delivery through partner organisations.

Norway's ability to effectively continue its support in complex environments like the Sahel depends on its ability to optimise its organisational mechanisms. Streamlining efforts to eliminate overlaps between various MFA sections, Norad departments, and the embassies is essential to maximise resource

¹*See, for example, Cliffe, S., Dwan, R., Wainaina, B. and Zamore, L. (2023), Aid strategies in 'politically estranged' settings: How donors can stay and deliver in fragile and conflict-affected states, Research Paper, London and New York: Royal Institute of International Affairs and New York University-Center on

International Cooperation; Zürcher, C. (2022), Impact of Aid in Highly Fragile States A synthesis of three systematic reviews of aid to Afghanistan, Mali and South Sudan, 2008 – 2021, Policy and Operations Evaluation Department (IOB).

utilisation. Moreover, scenario planning informed by conflict and political economy analyses will be a key element to the successful delivery of aid under constrained circumstances.

Due to their double positioning within the MFA system and in direct contact with the complex environments of partner countries, embassies are an essential part of the puzzle. Where available, they can play a crucial role as coordination and knowledge-sharing hubs in such environments. Conversely, managing multi-layered aid portfolios in volatile environments in the absence of an embassy raises specific challenges that should be carefully assessed, to ensure effective alternative systems are put in place to mitigate political and programmatic risks.

Moreover, internal coordination offers opportunities for cross-departmental collaboration and gap-bridging. However, it's vital to address the challenges of accessing verifiable information, a common hurdle in complex contexts. Limited access to reliable information and right-holders can hinder Norway's ability – either through embassy staff or through other in-country partners – to fully grasp local challenges and support the

identification of solutions. Therefore, alternative mechanisms for collecting reliable information (e.g. third party monitoring, increased reliance on systematic reporting by partners) should be explored.

While Norway has historically partnered with larger, established organisations, a more case-specific approach is needed to assess their suitability in complex environments. Engaging with lesser-known actors with closer ties to right-holders and greater adaptability in dynamic contexts should be considered. However, this requires putting in place the necessary mechanisms to mitigate potential risks associated with lesser-established organisations.

Conflict-sensitivity assessments and the integration of cross-cutting issues are also essential. In highly volatile environments, they require systematic approaches and dedicated tools. Establishing comprehensive guidelines for assessing cross-cutting issues, conflict sensitivity, and risk is crucial. These guidelines will ensure that all funded projects comprehensively and consistently address intricate challenges, enabling nuanced considerations and timely responses when needed. These efforts will also support

Norway's ability to frame its support within a nexus approach ensuring that all contributions are mutually reinforcing. This too will require the identification of partners and partner models that are innovative and case specific.

III. The HDP nexus: Spotlight on Food Security in Mali

Norway's Humanitarian Strategy of 2018 highlights the critical importance of enhancing the synergy between humanitarian aid, long-term development assistance, and peacebuilding efforts. The humanitarian - development connection is also prominently underscored in Norway's Strategy for Climate Adaptation, Prevention of Climate-related disasters and Fighting Hunger from 2021.

Furthermore, Norway's partner country strategy for Mali emphasizes the same interconnectedness, with efforts aimed at enhancing climate adaptation and promoting climate-resilient agriculture foreseen to reduce the population's dependence on food aid. According to this strategy, the increasing urgency for humanitarian aid in Mali underscores the potential emergence of new needs with little warning. Hence, the efficient and flexible delivery of aid becomes of

paramount importance. Equally noteworthy is the holistic consideration of the intricate interplay among humanitarian initiatives, development assistance, and stabilization efforts.

Mali faces persistent food insecurity, exacerbated by a combination of factors such as erratic rainfall, conflict, and the impacts of climate change. Recent data reveals that more than 29% of the Malian population suffers from malnutrition², with the ongoing conflict in the country further intensifying this crisis by displacing people and disrupting agricultural activities. Additionally, the global repercussions of the war in Ukraine have extended their reach to Mali, disrupting global food markets and compounding the challenges faced by the country in ensuring food security.

The evaluation finds that Norway's support for Mali's agriculture aligns well with Mali's priorities, and has been successful in contributing to the development of the country's agricultural sector. Norwegian efforts have focused specific attention on enhancing women's economic independence, in the hope

that this would empower them to make better food and nutrition choices. However, how food security issues interact with local gender dynamics was not explored by interventions funded. Norway has contributed to food security in Mali by supporting interventions that address aspects of each of the four dimensions of food security (availability,

access, utilization and stability), with several funded interventions supporting multiple dimensions. Some results are documented, while others are expected to materialize. Several conditions have affected different aspects of food security, either helping or preventing the achievement of results (see box 1).

Box 1: Norway's support to food security in Mali: Enabling and hindering factors.

Food Availability:

- Successful introduction of new products relied on community engagement and continuous dialogue.
- Products ill-fitted to the environment often resulted in failure.

Food Access:

- Right-holders targeted for support needed resources to participate effectively.
- Cash support for right-holders required available food for purchase.
- Stable markets and demand were essential for introducing new products.

Food Utilisation:

- Efforts focused on fostering local systems to boost local economies.
- Successful in more stable environments (e.g. functioning school systems, food availability) but challenging in unstable areas.

Food Stability:

- Stable markets with available and affordable products were critical.
- Relied on local efforts and faced similar challenges as food utilization initiatives.

² IPC Cadre Harmonis. 'Mali' (online). Available from: <https://www.icpinfo.org/ch>.

The Norwegian food security partner portfolio included actors with mandates in the humanitarian, development, and peace sectors. With Norway's support across all four dimensions of food security, this provided fertile ground for synergies. However, Norway did not fully capitalize on these synergies, likely owing to communication gaps among various responsible units and insufficient coordination among partners who could have amplified their individual efforts by teaming up. Ensuring food security is a complex endeavour, highlighting the need for multifaceted interventions that address various aspects of the issue. Collaboration between different organisations and projects could have enhanced results, but this potential was often overlooked.

Ex-post collaboration might reduce fragmentation and redundancy and facilitates complementarity. But an ex-ante coherent approach can lead to better results, ensuring a degree of positive goal interaction among projects and dynamic interactions based on thorough context analyses, gender analyses, conflict assessments, and risk analyses.

Food security in volatile environments depends on reliable and up-to-date comprehensive contextual analyses that should account for

physical, market and societal factors. Factors such as conflict intensity and risks, addressing the challenges of limited access to right-holders, aid/food politicization, and regional tensions are crucial. The peace dimension of the nexus in food security materializes at different levels, most significantly at the community level, where addressing local conflict dynamics and developing local peace mechanisms to manage conflicts and create conditions for collaboration around natural resources is paramount. Moreover, given the volatile nature of the environment, which is, by definition, fast evolving, it's necessary to retain the capacity to regularly update these analyses. Such updates should be conducted on a rolling basis, at regular intervals, or in response to significant changes in the situation.



IV. Conclusion

The experience of Norway's aid engagement in the rapidly changing the Sahel region reminds us of the need for flexible strategies based on comprehensive analyses. In this dynamic landscape, the absence of an embassy accentuates the importance of finding robust ways to remain current about the realities on the ground. Partnering with entities deeply familiar with the local context is therefore essential. Finding the right constellation of partners depends on both the evolving environment and strategic priorities, and scenario planning emerges as a critical approach. Both scenario planning and local partnerships requires human resources to have the capacity to effectively monitor and engage with partner organisations.

Department for Evaluation

evaluation@norad.no
norad.no