

REPORT 1 2023

Evaluation of Norwegian aid engagement in the Sahel

Organisational Management



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Carried out by Tana Copenhagen.

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Preface

Norway has been engaged in the Sahel area in Africa since the 1970s with both humanitarian and development assistance. The Department of Evaluation in Norad decided to evaluate this engagement as it is an important, but also challenging part of Norway's development assistance.

We can now offer our findings in two different reports. The purpose of this report is to critically evaluate the organisation, coordination, and management of Norway's engagement in the Sahel. In report no. 2, we review evidence of results of the Norwegian support to improve food security in Mali. The two reports will hopefully enhance learning and may be used to adapt the current Sahel strategy, which is presented as a living document subject to adjustments and refinement when required.

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

However, we believe that there are important lessons to be drawn for the work in the Sahel from evaluations in these unpredictable contexts.

Norway's support to countries in fragile situations has increased in recent years. Such assistance requires both flexibility and a high degree of coordination and scenario planning. We therefore hope that the insight of these two reports can also be of use in future support to countries outside the Sahel region in fragile situations.

The evaluation was carried out by a team from Tana Copenhagen in collaboration with Chr. Michelsen's Institute (CMI).

We thank the team for a job well done.

Helge Østtveiten

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Abbreviations and acronyms

African Union	AU
Economic Community of West African States	ECOWAS
Ecole de Maintien de la Paix	EMP
EU civilian crisis management initiative	EUCAP
EU Emergency Trust Fund	EUTF
Geneva-based Global Community and Resilience Engagement Fund	GCREF
Global Partnership for Education	GPE
International Committee of the Red Cross	ICRC
International Fund for Agricultural Development	IFAD
Ministry of Foreign Affairs	MFA
United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali	MINUSMA
Norwegian Church Aid (Norwegian: Kirkens Nødhjelp)	NCA
Nordic International Support Foundation	NIS
Norwegian Refugee Council	NRC
Nongovernmental organisation	NGO
Official development assistance	ODA
Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development – Development Assistance Committee	OECD DAC
Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights	OHCHR
Terms of Reference	ToR
United Nations Development Programme	UNDP
United Nations Children's Fund	UNICEF
United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime	UNODC
World Food Programme	WFP
Women, Peace and Security	WPS





Executive summary

Purpose

The purpose of this report, the first of two, is to provide the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), Norad and the Norwegian embassy in Bamako with an evaluation of the organisational setup, strategic planning, partner selection and management of Norwegian aid to the Sahel, as well as of how lessons and learning are translated into the strategic direction of work in the Sahel. The period covered by the evaluation is from 2016 to 2022. The evaluation focused on the aspects mentioned above and on the Norwegian support provided to food security in Mali. The aim of the evaluation as a whole has been to examine different aspects of Norwegian support to the Sahel for the 2016–2022 period. The accompanying report focuses on Norwegian support to food security in Mali.

Background

Norwegian development-aid support to the Sahel began in the mid-1980s. At that time, the support had a strong focus on agriculture and food security in Mali but also included activities related to conflict mediation. The main channels for the delivery of support were Norwegian NGOs and UN agencies.

In late 2017 Norway's embassy in Bamako became operational and took over responsibility for Mali, Burkina Faso, Mauritania, Chad and Niger. In 2018, Mali and Niger were selected as formal partner countries for Norwegian development assistance, and the MFA launched the 2018–2020 *Strategy for Norway's Efforts in the Sahel Region*. In 2021, this strategy was revised and became the 2021–2025 *Strategy for Norway's*

Efforts in the Sahel Region. The revised strategy's primary focus is on peace, stability and development in the Sahel region. It acknowledges that the Sahel faces significant challenges, including poverty, inequality, climate change and violent extremism, which threaten the security and stability of the region and of the wider world.

This evaluation was anchored on the use of the following data-collection tools: document/archival research; in-depth interviews with staff at the MFA in Oslo, Norad, and the embassies in Bamako and Abuja, as well as representatives from agencies receiving grants; and a survey targeting grant managers. Statistical data on Norwegian disbursements were also analysed.





Key findings

Evaluation Question 1: To what extent do the organisational and management setup and strategic planning enable optimal use of all available workforce and expertise to facilitate efficient and effective Norwegian assistance to the Sahel?

Finding: *The current organisational management system is sub-optimal as it allows for considerable overlap between what the various MFA sections, Norad departments and the Embassy support and does not have a mechanism to ensure systematic exchange of information across agencies or even within agencies. In addition, the monitoring of non-earmarked funding is limited, and monitoring of results emanating from earmarked funds varies according to staff capacity (availability of time) and staff knowledge. Although there have been fluctuations in the number of contracts with grant recipients and available grant resources, the number of staff has remained fairly constant during the period under review. When assessing the ratio of staff members to the number of managed projects, Norad has consistently maintained a smaller staff count compared to both the MFA in Oslo and the embassy in Bamako. Although making a comparison based solely on staff numbers relative to project management responsibilities is flawed since all staff concerned have additional responsibilities. There are tools and guidelines to assess overall contractual compliance, but none to*

ensure programmatic implementation of activities. This means that substantive assessment of progress and results is reliant on the individual grant manager's own skill-set, including subject and context knowledge. The lack of tools also affects the systematic assessment of cross-cutting issues. Despite all these shortcomings, Norwegian assistance to the Sahel appears aligned with Norway's strategic goals. The above challenges coupled with lack of sufficiently detailed documentation prevents a clear assessment of the efficiency or effectiveness of many of the interventions.

Evaluation Question 2: To what extent is Norwegian assistance to the Sahel relevant and shows flexibility and ability to adapt to the continuously changing contexts and challenges in a conflict-sensitive manner? How does the organisational and management setup affect flexibility and adaptability, if at all?

Finding: *The findings of this evaluation suggest that the support to the Sahel has been relevant in a number of ways – specifically in terms of Norwegian policies and political priorities and the most pressing needs for right holders in the Sahel region. The support provided has also been flexible and adapted to changes in context, but is heavily reliant on the skills and contextual knowledge of implementing organisations. The management setup, however, is sub-optimal in terms of steering adaptation.*

Evaluation Question 3: To what extent is the Norwegian engagement coordinated, both internally and externally?

Finding: *Both internal and external coordination are limited. Internal coordination relies on policies and strategies that serve to ensure that support is aligned with Norwegian priorities. In addition, there is a Sahel Monitoring Tool that enables the alignment and oversight of activities as these relate to the strategy, and a number of meetings are held within sections and departments and with country focal points, all of which aid coordination. However, despite these efforts and tools, coordination across departments, sections and embassies is limited due to a number of factors, including that meetings tend to not engage across departments and sections, there is an institutional siloed approach to managing funded efforts (each section or department is singularly responsible, and there is no institutional incentive for coordinating with other sections or departments), there is a lack of tools that can serve to ensure a common understanding of key areas of work (e.g., how to understand and fully implement cross-cutting issues, conflict sensitivity, risk assessment) and the current monitoring tools are weak. Externally, the engagement is largely focused on information exchange rather than coordination of efforts, with the notable exception of initiatives that are co-funded by multiple donors. Additionally, the resources available to engage in coordination meetings is limited.*





Evaluation Question 4: To what extent do the different Norwegian strategies affecting the Sahel engagement facilitate a coherent and conflict-sensitive approach? To what extent are these strategies helpful for prioritising the support?

Finding: *The current Sahel strategy is an important reference document that has served to ensure that all interventions are aligned with key overarching Norwegian objectives. The country strategies have not been so widely used as guidance documents. Critically, the Sahel strategy and other key strategies highlight conflict sensitivity and gender, and specifically Women, Peace and Security, as key issues that require particular attention in the Sahelian context. These strategies have played an important role in prioritising areas of support, but political priorities, which may not always align with broader strategies, also determine the focus of Norwegian aid.*

Evaluation Question 5: What is the rationale behind the choice of partners? What assessments are carried out by Norway when selecting partners (including in relation to conflict sensitivity and coordinating with other donors in selecting partners)?

Finding: *The selection of partners tends to focus on larger organisations that are well known to Norway as experienced actors in a specific theme. The actual*

selection is based on pre-established and clear procedures for selection. Selected funding recipients must meet key criteria to be selected. Norway expects all funded parties to be responsible for relevant conflict-sensitivity assessment and for integrating cross-cutting issues. There is no detailed toolbox with tools that may serve to ensure that all actors understand and implement crosscutting issues and conflict sensitivity in a consistent, comparable, or systematic way.

Evaluation Question 6: To what extent does Norway ensure that lessons and experiences gained from its ongoing operations, from partners and from research evidence are used for learning and to adjust the strategic direction of Norwegian assistance?

Finding: *The degree to which lessons are learned and capitalised upon is heavily dependent on the interest and commitment of the individuals involved in any particular activity. The current systems do not promote reflection and learning, and often limit the degree of reflection and learning owing to the limited resources (person time) available. There are, however, some opportunities – both routine and ad hoc – that may facilitate learning and make it possible for Norwegian staff across different entities (the MFA in Oslo, Norad and the embassies) to redirect attention or make adjustments based on information gained.*



Photo: : Espen Røst | Panorama





Conclusion

This evaluation found that the Norwegian organisational and management structures that **manage the support to the Sahel** face clear limitations and have not taken all available steps to maximise the capacity of available staff resources. However, the possibilities for carrying out fundamental changes to those structures are limited. Still, there are important opportunities for improving the opportunities that staff have to optimise their ability to oversee funded interventions.

The evaluation also found that **coordination** between sections and departments at the MFA and Norad and relevant embassies, as well as coordination with other actors, was sub-optimal. This is a result several factors, including lack of staff resources (person time) limits the degree of coordination between Norwegian-funded activities and efforts by other donors; there is no systematic mechanism to ensure coordination consistently takes place between the MFA in Oslo, embassies and Norad; there are no systematic tools to assess programmes and review progress that can serve to facilitate a common understanding between actors; and there is currently no effort to ensure that grantees coordinate with each other when working on areas that are geographically or thematically similar, or to encourage them to do so.

Despite the challenges related both to the existing organisational and management structures and to coordination between the various relevant actors, the data consistently show that the support provided to the Sahel (1) **is well aligned with Norway's strategic objectives** and (2) **is relevant to the Sahelian context**.

The selection of partners relies heavily on the notion of **working with known partners**. The adoption of such an approach is intended to allow Norway to know in advance what it might expect: allowing it to build on longstanding relationships and to be familiar with the working modalities of its partners. However, it can also limit the opportunities to engage with organisations that may be better able to meet Norwegian objectives and may also lead partners to feel that they are not under pressure to perform. A focus on known partners may also lead to a reluctance to sever relationships even when results are sub-optimal.

Lastly, there are currently no measures to systematically ensure that **lessons** are effectively and fully learned and shared between different government departments and sections at the MFA in Oslo, Norad and the relevant embassies. This limitation can impact multiple aspects of the support because grant managers working on similar activities or themes are not aware of lessons that could allow them to improve their oversight or make specific demands of grantees.

Recommendations

Recommendation 1: Further Develop and Utilize the Sahel Monitoring Tool - The MFA should revise and expand the functionality of the Sahel monitoring tool and extend its use to include all relevant MFA departments, Norad, and relevant embassies. This tool must continue to track project alignment with the strategy and should also be enhanced to monitor progress in the Sahel region while enabling the compilation of historical data and recording of key lessons learned. In addition, the tool could also aim to make links to important thematic policy documents. It should be applied to all funded projects by the MFA, Norad, and embassies.

Recommendation 2: Comprehensive Guidelines for Cross-Cutting Issues, Conflict Sensitivity, and Risk Assessment - Through the MFA, the Norwegian government should establish clear guidelines encompassing cross-cutting issues (e.g., gender, climate change, anti-corruption, human rights), conflict sensitivity, and risk assessments. These guidelines should apply to all funded projects by the MFA, Norad, and embassies. Partner organisations will be responsible for adhering to these guidelines and reporting accordingly. Ensure that cross-cutting issues, conflict sensitivity, and risks are consistently and comprehensively addressed in all funded projects to promote a more nuanced consideration of these issues and adequate, timely, and consistent response or adaptation where needed.





Recommendation 3: Strengthen Embassy

Engagement and Knowledge Sharing – The embassy in Mali should take the lead in convening regular meetings among partners implementing projects on the ground. Norad and the MFA should have the option to and be encouraged to participate in these meetings to increase their understanding of ongoing initiatives in the Sahel. The embassy should also consider establishing a closed platform for continuous engagement, such as a shared team group, which will facilitate knowledge sharing and mutual support. These engagements will help strengthen collaboration and contextual knowledge among relevant Norwegian staff and partner organisations, enabling the early identification of collective challenges and relevant responses.

Recommendation 4: Promote Nexus-Based Projects and Build on Prior Recommendations

- Utilise the improved coordination and information sharing to identify and promote a nexus approach at the portfolio level. Nexus programming integrates various sectors (e.g., humanitarian, development, and peacebuilding) to address complex challenges. The foundational recommendations guiding this approach include (Recommendation 1), (Recommendation 2), and (Recommendation 3). Emphasise the importance of linking interventions across sectors for holistic and integrated outcomes.

Recommendation 5: Partners - Conduct regular organisational assessments of established partners to verify that their ability to deliver (in specific contexts) has not been compromised. Additionally, consistently review the pool of partners to confirm that the agencies receiving support are aligned with Norwegian objectives. When necessary, incorporate new partners with specialised competencies that hold value for Norway.

Recommendation 6: Incorporate Lessons Learned

- Ensure that all discussions, platforms, and reporting on funded projects have a clear agenda item or reporting section focused on lessons learned. This section should critically highlight what emerged from the learning process and actions taken based on the lessons learned. Make direct links to relevant earlier recommendations, specifically those pertaining to (Recommendation 1) and (Recommendation 2). This approach will foster continuous improvement and adaptation across all interventions. Additionally, develop guidance that details what can be expected from lessons learned and highlights the expectation that learning and adaptation emerging from learning are critical. This will promote the fostering of systematic learning organisations at the implementer level.





1

Introduction





Norway's targeted development-aid support to the Sahel began in the mid-1980s with the Sahel–Sudan–Ethiopia programme, which had a strong focus on agriculture and food security in Mali but also supported conflict-mediation activities. The main channels for the delivery of support consisted of Norwegian Nongovernmental organisations (NGOs) and United Nation (UN) agencies. Development aid to Mali continued on a limited scale after the Sahel–Sudan–Ethiopia programme ended in the 1990's.¹

More recently, in late 2017, Norway's embassy in Bamako became operational and took over responsibility for Mali, Burkina Faso, Mauritania, Chad and Niger. The embassy in Abuja is responsible for Nigeria and Cameroon. Prior to the opening of the embassy in Bamako, diplomatic representation to the previously mentioned Sahel countries had been divided between Accra, Abuja and Khartoum.

Following the 2017–2018 government White Paper on Partner Countries, in 2018 the Norwegian parliament approved Mali and Niger as new partner countries for

Norwegian aid.² The two countries were classified as belonging to a group of fragile and conflict-affected partner countries where the focus should be on stabilisation and conflict prevention. South Sudan and Somalia were the other African partner countries included in this group.

On the same year, the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) in Oslo launched the 2018–2020 *Strategy for Norway's Efforts in the Sahel Region*. The strategy established and prioritised three goals:

1. Contribute to the promotion of conflict prevention and conflict resolution;
2. Contribute to the promotion of political stabilisation and enhancing security;
3. Build resilience and lay the foundation for inclusive economic, social and political development, with a view to improving living conditions and reducing the need for humanitarian aid.

The 2018–2020 strategy aimed to support Norway's ability to harness its engagement both in the Sahel region and globally, and to identify links between funded interventions, policy priorities and the aforementioned objectives. The strategy identified the Sahel as including Mali, Niger, Mauritania, Chad and Burkina Faso, as well as parts of North-eastern Nigeria.³ In 2021, country strategies were developed for Mali and Niger.⁴

¹ Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. 2018. Meld. St. 17 (2017–2018) Partnerland i utviklingspolitikken.

² Mali, and several other African countries, was first identified as a partner country in the 2009-2010 Ministry of Foreign Affairs budget proposal. At that time there was not clear definition of what being a partner country meant. The identification of more clear characteristics of engagement with partner countries was detailed in the following white paper: Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. 2017. Meld. St. 24 (2016–2017) Felles ansvar for felles fremtid: Bærekraftsmålene og norsk utviklingspolitikk. See Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. 2018. Meld. St. 17 (2017–2018) Partnerland i utviklingspolitikken.

³ Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. 2018. Strategy for Norway's Efforts in the Sahel Region 2018–2020.

⁴ Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. 2018. Strategy for Norway's Efforts in the Sahel Region 2018–2020.





In 2021, the strategy was revised and became the *2021–2025 Strategy for Norway's Efforts in the Sahel Region* (also referred to in this document as the Sahel strategy). The revision aimed to ensure continued Norwegian support to the region and alignment with European priorities, with a clear focus on addressing the root causes of instability and promoting sustainable and inclusive development. The revised strategy acknowledges that the Sahel faces significant challenges, including poverty, inequality, climate change and violent extremism, which threaten the security and stability both of the region and of the wider world. In line with earlier strategic objectives, the 2021–2025 strategy identifies three priority areas of intervention:

1. Strengthening governance, human rights and the rule of law. Norway aims to support initiatives that promote good governance, respect for human rights and the rule of law in the Sahel region. Activities towards this goal include supporting initiatives that promote access to justice, combat corruption, and promote the participation of women and youth in decision-making processes.

2. Supporting inclusive economic development.

Norway aims to promote economic development in the Sahel region, particularly in rural areas, by supporting initiatives that create jobs, increase productivity, and promote sustainable and inclusive economic growth. Activities towards this goal include supporting initiatives that promote renewable energy, sustainable agriculture and private-sector development.

3. Strengthening regional security.

Norway aims to contribute to regional security in the Sahel region by supporting initiatives that promote stability and prevent violent extremism. Activities towards this goal include supporting the training and capacity-building of security forces, promoting conflict prevention and resolution, and supporting the reintegration of ex-combatants.

The present report, the first of two, forms part of a larger evaluation of Norwegian support to the Sahel, which will also include a second report looking at Norwegian support to food security in Mali. The key objective of the present document is to present the

findings from the evaluation team's examination of **the organisational setup, strategic planning, partner selection and management** of Norwegian aid to the Sahel. The evaluation has also assessed the **role of learning** and how lessons are translated into the strategic direction of work in the Sahel. The period covered by the evaluation is from 2016 to 2022.

The MFA, Norad and the Norwegian embassy in Bamako are expected to be the principal users of the products of the evaluation (including this report, the policy brief and presentation of findings) – particularly the departments and sections highlighted in Figure 2 and Figure 3. However, it is also expected that the evaluation will provide key insights that may also be useful to other actors, including other government ministries and departments/sections within Norway and implementers working in the Sahel and in fragile and conflict-affected countries and regions. An overview of what this report captures, focuses on and targets is provided in Figure 1.





FIGURE 1

Overview of the assignment

Objective	Evaluation scope		Evaluation users
<p>The main objectives of the Evaluation of Norwegian Aid Engagements in the Sahel are:</p> <p>Evaluation Objective 1: To assess whether the organisational set-up, strategic planning, partner selection and overall management of Norwegian aid to the Sahel is enabling effective assistance to the region.</p> <p>Evaluation Objective 3: To provide information on the extent to which Norway harnesses knowledge and experience to adjust the strategic direction of its engagement in the Sahel.</p>	Thematic	Evaluation of Norwegian Aid Engagement in the Sahel	<p>Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Norad, the Norwegian Embassy in Bamako and the partners implementing projects the Sahel.</p>
	Temporal	2016 - 2022	
	Spatial	Sahel (Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania and Niger)	
	Evaluation questions (EQ)		
<p>Objective 1: Organisational set-up, strategic planning, partner selection and management of Norwegian Aid to the Sahel:</p> <p>a) To what extent do the organisational and management set-up and strategic planning enable optimal use of all available workforce and expertise to facilitate efficient and effective Norwegian assistance to the Sahel?</p> <p>b) To what extent is the Norwegian assistance to the Sahel relevant, and shows flexibility and ability to adapt to the continuously changing contexts and challenges, in a conflict-sensitive manner? How does the organisational and management set-up affect flexibility and adaptability, if at all?</p> <p>c) To what extent is the Norwegian engagement coordinated, both internally and externally?</p>		<p>d) To what extent do the different Norwegian strategies affecting the Sahel engagement facilitate a coherent and conflict-sensitive approach? To what extent are strategies helpful for prioritising the support?</p> <p>e) What is the rationale behind the choice of partners? What assessments are done when selecting partners in Norway (including in relation to conflict-sensitivity and coordinating with other donors in selecting partners)?</p> <p>Objective 3: Learning To what extent does Norway ensure that lessons and experiences gained from its ongoing operations, from partners and research evidence are used for learning, and to adjust the strategic direction of Norwegian assistance?</p>	

The report is divided into six sections. Section 2, which follows this introductory section, sets out the methodology used for the evaluation. Section 3 presents the statistical and policy context for the evaluation. Section 4 presents the evaluation's findings. Section 5 sets out the conclusions of the evaluation, while Section 6 presents the recommendations identified as emerging from the evaluation findings.

Source: Proposal Evaluation Team.





2

Methodology





In this section, the methods of data collection and the process used for the analysis are presented.

2.1 Data collection

The following types of data-collection processes were conducted:

Archival research/document review: Material reviewed included documents obtained from archives in Oslo, from the archives at the Norwegian embassy in Bamako and in the public domain (see Annex 7).

Semi-structured interviews: Semi-structured interviews were conducted with staff from Norad, the MFA in Oslo, the Norwegian embassy in Bamako, and the Norwegian embassy in Abuja, as well as with some recipients of funds and subject-area experts (see Annex 2 and Annex 4).

Online survey: The online survey conducted for the evaluation targeted individuals that, according to information provided by Norad, had managed projects that were part of the Sahel portfolio at some point between 2016 and 2021 (see Annex 5).

Statistical information:⁵ Statistical information used in the evaluation includes both information provided by Norad and data obtained directly from the OECD DAC.⁶ Since the way in which the data were examined has implications for the figures presented in this evaluation, some details on how this was done are included here. The process of identifying disbursements included, first, a search by Norad's Statistical Section that focused on allocations that contained in the title or description of the relevant agreement a geographical reference to the Sahel or any of the Sahel countries. In the second step, the data generated through the first search were assessed qualitatively to enable the exclusion of disbursements that were not related to the Sahel as defined for the present evaluation. This led to the exclusion of those that had a focus on Nigeria, North Africa, Somalia, Sudan or South Sudan, or where the amounts expected to be disbursed to the Sahel, as defined for this evaluation, were marginal. In the third step, strategy documents specifically relevant to the Sahel and Sahel countries were consulted to ensure that nothing mentioned in them had been omitted. Fourth, an assessment of other documents related to Norwegian support to the Sahel, along with interviews, identified a series of activities that had not been captured by the above process, such as the Norwegian core funding to the UN Multidimensional

Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA). Fifth, an additional and highly significant disbursement to the Sahel was included: Norwegian core funding to multilateral institutions and global funds. This funding is captured in OECD DAC statistics as 'imputed multilateral support' and were provided to the evaluation team by the Norad statistics department.

The evaluation team has included in the sample of disbursements Norwegian humanitarian support to global programmes related to education in emergencies where the Sahel component (specifically linked to the Lake Chad area) may be large but not necessarily dominant. Disbursements falling under this category include earmarked funding for the *Education Cannot Wait* programme (managed by United Nations Children's Fund [UNICEF]), which targets the Sahel/ Lake Chad, Yemen and Syria.

Case study: A case study approach was employed to respond to the evaluation questions. Interventions selected as case studies were identified on the basis of a review of the over 50 agreement partners that have received support during the period under evaluation. During the inception phase of the evaluation, the evaluation team found that 30 of the agreement partners had ongoing contracts/ engagements. The final sample used for the evaluation was selected through consultation with Norad, the MFA and the embassy in Bamako (see Annex 6).

⁵ Although the assignment also covers 2022, statistical data were not available to include interventions in that year.

⁶ The OECD DAC statistics are available at: <https://stats.oecd.org/Index.aspx?DataSetCode=TABLE2A#>.





2.2 Data analysis

Data collected for this evaluation were organised according to questions and sub-questions established in the evaluation matrix (see Annex 3) and coded in accordance with the evaluation questions. Rubrics were developed both to assess how context adaptations were understood and measured, and to explore how conflict sensitivity was examined. These rubrics were useful for systematically plotting responses (the rubrics are available in Annex 2).

2.3 Challenges, limitations and mitigation measures

Here, some of the key challenges and limitations encountered during the conduct of the evaluation are explored.

Survey: The available data on grant managers did not permit the easy identification of all relevant grant managers, nor did it automatically include current and relevant contact details. Despite considerable efforts by Norad's section on statistics, there are some unavoidable omissions in the data which require mention. Specifically, the information on relevant grant managers from the MFA's UN Section and Section on Human Rights and Democracy, or at the embassies in Accra, Abuja and Addis Ababa (these embassies

all managed projects related to the Sahel, which were implemented through African Union [AU], Economic Community of West African States [ECOWAS] and regional NGO projects), or grant managers responsible for core funding and non-earmarked funding to multilateral institutions and global funds were not included. In addition, the dataset is only able to identify the most recent grant manager in an agreement period, which means that in instances where more than one grant manager managed a single project during a single contract period, only one (i.e., the last manager) is identified. Moreover, both staff who no longer worked for the MFA/Norad and individuals that were interviewed for the evaluation were excluded from the sample. Further details on the response rate for the survey and its implications can be found in Annex 5.

The principal challenge with the survey was twofold. First, the exclusion of staff no longer working at Norad and the MFA was not an objective of the sampling, but a result of unavailable contact details. This limited the reach the survey could have. Second, several respondents contacted the evaluation team to explain that they felt they should self-exclude because their engagement in assignments in the Sahel was limited and not current/recent. Although the evaluation team encouraged those potential respondents to attempt to respond to the best of their ability, this development does suggest that there was a degree of self-exclusion among respondents.

Statistical data: The statistical data are imperfect, and there may be omissions or errors in the identified disbursements and dataset. However, the evaluation team is confident that the dataset analysed gives a reasonably accurate picture of the totality of Norwegian financial flows and aid-funded interventions in the Sahel.

Other challenges and limitations: Aside from challenges with survey response and reaching respondents, and the statistical inaccuracies noted above, there were additional challenges and limitations that deserve mention. Specifically, in relation to measuring staff capacity, the following should be noted. Measuring the number of personnel associated with supporting the work in the Sahel provides a key indicator for assessing the existing organisational and management setup. However, given the organisational constellation of Norwegian support, doing so presents some challenges. The support provided to the Sahel comprises more than just the funded interventions: there are also diplomatic and political efforts that do not constitute donor aid to specific projects. Indeed, it is impossible to quantify how staff spent their time or how influential or related to the Sahel each activity in which staff engaged has been. Accordingly, a more restrictive assessment, focused only on projects, has been attempted here.





Still, after considering this restriction on the scope of the assessment, there are a number of additional challenges involved in assessing the staff capacity available to work on Sahel-related projects. First, staff members engage in a number of activities, not just the management of projects, and therefore the number of staff is an imperfect measurement of project management resources. Second, the allocation of tasks is thematic, not geographically based, which means that grant managers responsible for activities associated with a specific thematic focus in the Sahel are likely to be responsible for similar activities that address related issues elsewhere. Third, the technical capacity and skill of grant managers vary therefore there is a risk of disparity in how projects are managed. Despite these limitations, however, examining staff numbers does still provide some important insights which are reflected in the findings (section 3.1)



Photo: **Gunnar Zachrisen** | Panorama





3

Policies and management of Norwegian aid to Sahel





3.1 Policy documents and guidelines

The Norwegian engagement in the Sahel region is informed by a range of policy documents, including guidelines and action plans. Policy documents guiding Norwegian foreign and development policies, including the political platforms of the different government coalitions,⁷ have served as a framework for a range of thematic and geographic policy guidelines, as well as several action plans. Relevant policy documents include *the Humanitarian Strategy (2019) and the Strategic Framework for Norway's Engagement in Conflict Prevention, Stabilisation, and Resilience Building (2017)*.⁸ Relevant action plans included two formal government action plans: *Women, Peace and Security: The Norwegian*

7 See Jeløya. 2018. Political Platform for a Government Formed by the Conservative Party, the Progress Party and the Liberal Party; Granavolden. 2019. Political Platform for the Norwegian Government, Formed by the Conservative Party, the Progress Party, the Liberal Party and the Christian Democratic Party; Hurdal. 2021. Platform for the Government Formed by the Labour Party and the Centre Party; and the main relevant Government White Papers to Parliament: Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. 2014. Meld.St.25 (2023–2014) Utdanning for utvikling; Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. 2015. Meld. St.37 (2014–2015) Global security Challenges in Norway's Foreign Policy: Terrorism, Organised Crime, Piracy and Cyber Threats; Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. 2017. Meld. St. 36 (2016–2017) Veivalg i norsk utenriks- og sikkerhetspolitikk; Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. 2017. Meld. St. 24 (2016–2017) Felles ansvar for felles fremtid: Bærekraftsmålene og norsk utviklingspolitikk; and Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. 2018. Meld. St. 17 (2017–2018) Partnerland i utviklingspolitikken.

8 Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. 2018. *Norway's Humanitarian Strategy: An Effective and Integrated Approach*; Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. 2017. *Strategic Framework for Norway's Engagement in Conflict Prevention, Stabilisation, and Resilience Building* (unofficial translation).

Government's Action Plan 2019–2022 (2018) and Food, People and the Environment: The Government's Action Plan on Sustainable Food Systems in the Context of Norwegian Foreign and Development Policy (2019).⁹

The MFA also developed specific geographic strategies. These include the 2021 country strategies for specific partner countries – Mali and Niger – and the 2018–2020 *Strategy for Norway's Efforts in the Sahel Region*, subsequently revised as the *2021–2025 Strategy for Norway's Efforts in the Sahel Region*, which is the main document in use today.

The importance of the aid budgets must also be emphasised. The Norwegian parliament's annual aid budget provides the financial framework and the funds for the MFA's Sahel engagement.¹⁰ Parliamentary debates and decisions provide additional guidelines and directives for the MFA. The parliament's appropriations allocate funds to different chapters of the aid budget. Several of the budget chapters and posts have different

9 Norwegian Ministries. 2018. *Women Peace and Security: The Norwegian Government's Action Plan*; and Norwegian Ministries. 2019. *Food People and the Environment: The Government's Action Plan on Sustainable Food Systems in the Context of Norwegian Foreign and Development Policy*.

10 The Norwegian government presents its annual budget to parliament in October (through a process called 'Proposition to the Storting'). The proposition includes a budget for the MFA, together with an aid budget and proposals and summary of activities and results for each chapter and chapter item. See: <https://www.regjeringen.no/no/dokument/prop/id1753/> for an overview of propositions.

grant-scheme rules, with consequent implications for priorities, selection of partners and disbursements.¹¹

3.2 Management and organisation

Activities in the Sahel are managed by a number of sections at the MFA, different Norad departments and the relevant Norwegian embassies. Figure 2 and Figure 3 depict the constellations within the MFA in Oslo and Norad, respectively (sections responsible for multilateral institutions and global funds are not included). These figures highlight the large number of sections and departments that are responsible for overseeing activities in the Sahel.

The management of interventions by the MFA in Oslo is dominated by the Ministry's Humanitarian Section and disbursements through UN agencies (5) and Norwegian NGOs (6) (Figure 5). Additionally, the MFA's department for Security Policy and the High North manages support to MINUSMA and the deployment of Norwegian police (Section for Security Policy and North America), along with projects aimed at preventing violent extremism, crime and terror (Section for Global Security and Disarmament). Other sections in the Multilateral Department manage several UN projects (such as support to the UN Peacebuilding Fund and

11 See Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. 2021. *Grant Management Assistant* (unpublished), extracted on 21.08.2021 from Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs website.

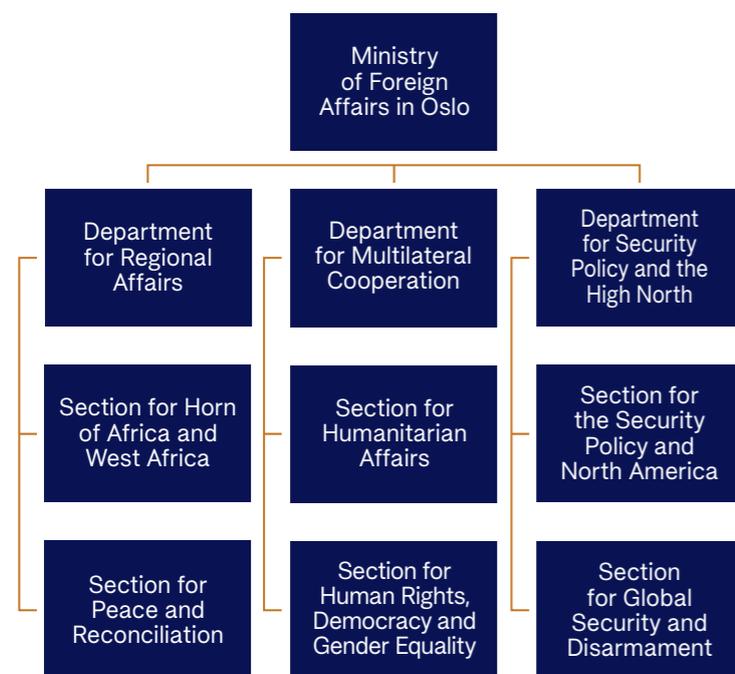




the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights). The Section for Peace and Reconciliation manages several projects related to stabilisation and mediation. The department for European Affairs in

FIGURE 2

MFA Oslo: Main departments and sections engaged in activities in the Sahel

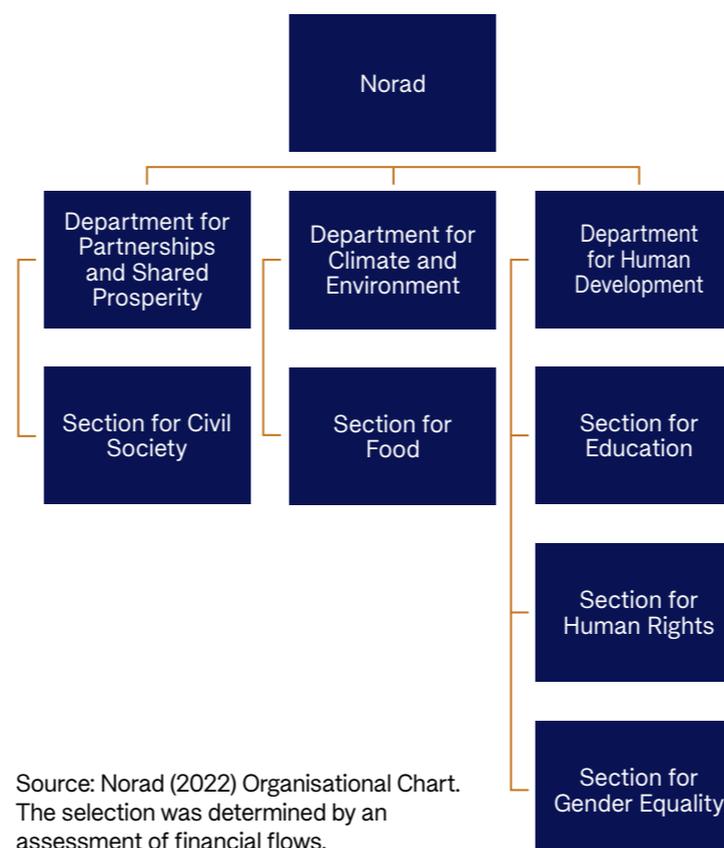


Source: Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (2022) Organisational Chart Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The selection was determined by an assessment of financial flows.

close cooperation with the Section for West Africa and the Horn of Africa (the Sahel desk) manages a grant to the EU Trust for the Sahel to prevent irregular migration.

FIGURE 3

Main Norad departments and sections engaged in activities in the Sahel



Source: Norad (2022) Organisational Chart. The selection was determined by an assessment of financial flows.

Typically, Norad manages more long-term development assistance, with most of the funds coming from thematic budget lines (civil society, education, food security, etc.). Following the 2021 reorganisation of Norad, several of the agreements that fell under the aegis of the former Civil Society Department are now managed by other sections. Today, the Civil Society Section manages support to larger NGOs with global activities in several thematic areas and retains budget responsibility for funds allocated to other sections in instances where funding comes from the civil society budget chapter. In addition to the Civil Society section, the sections for Education and Food also manage considerable portions of the support.

In Mali, the Norwegian embassy's portfolio is dominated by projects related to climate change and food security in Mali; support to education and some aspects of food security in Niger; and a range of Mali-specific and regional projects focusing on stabilisation and governance issues.

Overall, the above data show that the management of interventions is split not just between different agencies but also between different sections and departments of the same agencies, which can lead to complexity, overlaps and the need for greater coordination.





3.3 Financial disbursements to the Sahel in context

The financial disbursements to the Sahel reported for the 2016–2021 period provide an indication of the degree of Norwegian focus on the region.¹² Support to the Sahel needs to be understood at two different levels:

First, an examination of the earmarked funding allocated to the different countries that make up the Sahel¹³ shows that resource allocations over the 2016–2021 period have grown over the years and have consistently favoured Mali and Niger (see Figure 4).

At first glance, a comparison between earmarked funding to the Sahelian countries and earmarked funds disbursed over the same period to the two other fragile partner countries, South Sudan and Somalia, as well as to Nigeria, shows that the total disbursement to the Sahel countries was less than what was provided to the two other fragile countries in the region (South Sudan and Somalia). Indeed, the disbursements destined for Mali and Niger are comparable to those allocated to Nigeria alone over the specified time period even though Nigeria

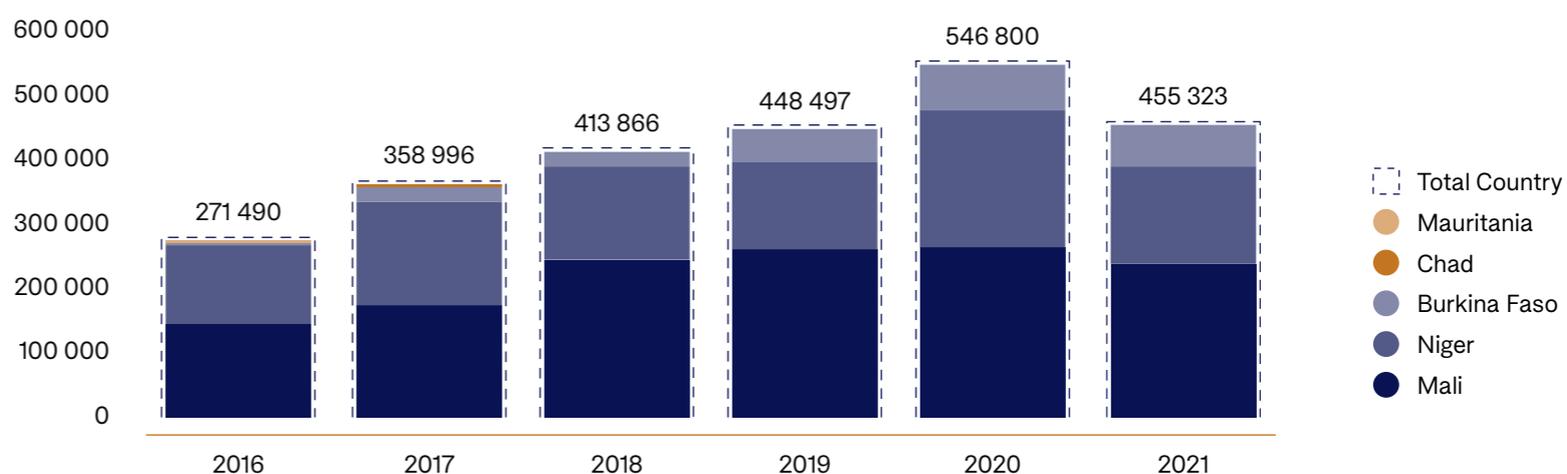
¹² Data for 2022 were not available when this report was produced (April 2023).

¹³ The Strategy for Norway's Efforts in the Sahel Region (2021–2025) defines the Sahel as including Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania and Niger. The Lake Chad area of Cameroon and Nigeria are also to be included as part of the region, but this area is more loosely defined and hence hard to capture.

FIGURE 4

Earmarked ODA disbursed per country 2016–2021 (NOK 1000s)

1000 NOK



Source: Norad database 2016–2021 Sahel

is not a partner country for Norwegian aid. However, the support to Nigeria must be understood in context. An examination of the Norwegian disbursements to Nigeria reveals that a considerable proportion of the funded interventions in Nigeria focus on the conflict in northern Nigeria and the Lake Chad area. Therefore, these resources could be seen as supporting efforts

in the Sahel.^{14,15} If funds to Nigeria are considered as supporting ventures in the Sahel, then the earmarked resources to the Sahel are on a par with the earmarked resources disbursed to South Sudan (see Table 1).

¹⁴ Norad's aid statistics provide a list of all agreements in Nigeria in the 2016–2021 period (NOK 1.1 billion for 60 agreements). To judge from the agreement partners and the names of the agreements, most of these are related to northern Nigeria and the Lake Chad area. See <https://resultater.norad.no/geography/africa/nigeria>.

¹⁵ The Strategy for Norway's Efforts in the Sahel Region (2021–2025) defines the Sahel as including the Lake Chad area of Cameroon and Nigeria, but what exactly comprises this area or what prerequisites activities in these two countries must meet to be recognised as Sahel support is not clearly defined.



**TABLE 1**
Country-level earmarked disbursements to Sahel countries, Nigeria, South Sudan and Somalia 2016–2021 (NOK 1000s)

Country	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	Total
Mali	145,012	172,829	244,879	260,716	264,302	237,880	1,325,618
Niger	122,130	161,671	144,815	135,662	211,456	150,678	926,412
Burkina Faso	3,569	22,496	24,172	52,119	71,042	66,765	240,163
Chad	-	2,000	-	-	-	-	2,000
Mauritania	780	-	-	-	-	-	780
Total Sahel	271,490	358,996	413,866	448,497	546,800	455,323	2,494,973
South Sudan	560,900	603,900	616,400	603,800	638,300	606,000	3,629,300
Somalia	339,900	546,800	543,100	563,600	613,700	526,600	3,133,700
Nigeria	131,600	284,200	175,800	184,500	170,200	147,300	1,093,600

Source: Norad database 2016–2021 Sahel; South Sudan, Somalia and Nigeria: Norad aid statistics at: <https://resultater.norad.no/geography?show=bistand>

Second, in addition to earmarked funding, Norway also provides core funding to a number of organisations. Some of this funding ends up supporting efforts in the Sahel. It is therefore also important to account for this investment.

Core funding to the Sahel countries remained relatively stable for the period 2016–2021 and accounted for between 53% and 62% of funding provided to the region.¹⁶

¹⁶ Earmarked from Norad database 2016–2021 Sahel; core from OECD DAC statistics, available at: <https://stats.oecd.org/Index.aspx?DataSetCode=TABLE2A#>.

The data show that a larger proportion of funding is channelled through core funding in the Sahel region than in other fragile contexts. In South Sudan, for example, core funding accounted for between 9% and 18%; in Somalia, the respective figure varied between 7% and 25%. An exception to this is Nigeria, where the majority of resources – between 52% and 68% – are core funds.¹⁷ For these funds, it is not possible to ascertain

¹⁷ Earmarked from Norad aid statistics, available at: <https://resultater.norad.no/geography?show=bistand>; core funding from OECD DAC statistics available at <https://stats.oecd.org/Index.aspx?DataSetCode=TABLE2A#>.

what proportion is invested in efforts in the Lake Chad area, and hence what may also support Sahel activities.

When the types of partners and themes funded are examined, the data show that Norway funds four main themes in the Sahel region: education, climate and food security, conflict prevention, and humanitarian aid.

For the period under review, the education sector has been the principal recipient of Norwegian support. This is the case in relation to both Mali and Niger. Funding has been provided as direct support to a government education fund (Niger), earmarked through mainly UNICEF (Mali and other countries), or provided through several small and large Norwegian, international and local NGOs in Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso. In Niger, education support was provided through Switzerland through delegated authority in earlier years. In addition, significant funding is provided for education in emergencies – mainly linked to the Lake Chad area.

Norway has also provided funding to global education initiatives. In the case of the *Global Partnership for Education* (GPE), for example, Norway contributed nearly NOK 4 billion to the fund in the 2016–2021 period. Along with the UK and the EU Commission, Norway is one of the GPE's largest funders.¹⁸ The fund has allocated several hundred million US dollars to

¹⁸ The figures are derived from Norad statistics and from the GPE's website. For the latter, see <https://www.globalpartnership.org/content/donor-contributions-gpe>.





education-related country programmes in the Sahel. A similar pattern is evident also in other major education initiatives supported by Norway, including the UNICEF-managed *Education Cannot Wait* fund that Norway helped set up in 2016, which targets education in fragile and conflict-affected countries.

Climate and food security make up the second main area supported by Norway. Support to this theme has focused on agriculture, climate change and food security, and has focused on activities in Mali and Niger. Some of this support has been channelled directly to public-sector institutions (Mali), but the majority of the resources have been channelled through multilateral agencies (United Nations Development Programme [UNDP], WFP, International Fund for Agricultural Development [IFAD] and others) and Norwegian, international and local NGOs. Some of the funding for this sector is provided as humanitarian aid.

Conflict prevention, stabilisation and peacebuilding comprise the third major area of Norwegian support. This support has been mainly focused on activities in Mali as well as a limited number of regional initiatives. Norway has supported work in this sector through a number of initiatives, including the Danish–Norwegian stabilisation programme, core funding to the UN Peacebuilding Fund, support to MINUSMA, and through NGOs and international organisations. Support to MINUSMA includes direct support (core funding), deployment of Norwegian police and (non-aid-funded)

military contributions, and earmarked funding for stabilisation through the MINUSMA Trust Fund.

Support in this sector has been used to focus on the UN Security Council Resolution 1325 Women, Peace and Security agenda, especially in relation to participation in the peace process and implementation of the Algiers Peace Accord. Several projects have addressed governance issues and have been implemented through both UNDP and NGOs.

Additionally, there are several short-term projects linked to specific Norwegian initiatives and responses to unfolding crisis and developments on the ground. These include the use of the Norwegian NORCAP facility to provide staff to the African Union, ECOWAS, UN agencies and the EU civilian crisis management initiative (EUCAP). The total number of agreements which Norway is part of through NORCAP is relatively small.

Humanitarian aid has been a main element of the Norwegian engagement. Humanitarian support has focused on responding to humanitarian appeals from the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and the UN. In addition, humanitarian support has been channelled through partnership agreements with Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) and a few other Norwegian NGOs.

Although the above focus on themes indicates that Norway has engaged with a wide range of actors, a review of earmarked funding to country and regional activities in the Sahel shows that the ten organisations receiving most funding account for 61% of the total earmarked funding to the Sahel for the period under review (see Figure 5). These organisations include a mix of agencies, of which five are multilateral agencies and five are Norwegian NGOs.

Further assessment of the funding partners shows that 50% of agreements are 4–5 years long and that these types of agreements account for 52.77% of the funds disbursed.¹⁹ The data also show that Mali holds the largest number of agreements (124), with Niger holding less than half that number (51), followed by Burkina Faso (17), while Mauritania and Chad have only one each. This underlines the focus on Mali and Niger (see also Table 1).

In relation to core funding, UNICEF and UNDP also figure as the important recipients of funds. Other leading recipients of core funding include the World Bank and the global health and education funds. The evaluation team did not make any further attempts to map and analyse Norwegian funding flows to the Sahel through core and geographically unspecified programme funding to multilateral institutions.

¹⁹ Norad database 2016–2021 Sahel. Data on support to MINUSMA were not available and hence have not been included in this calculation.

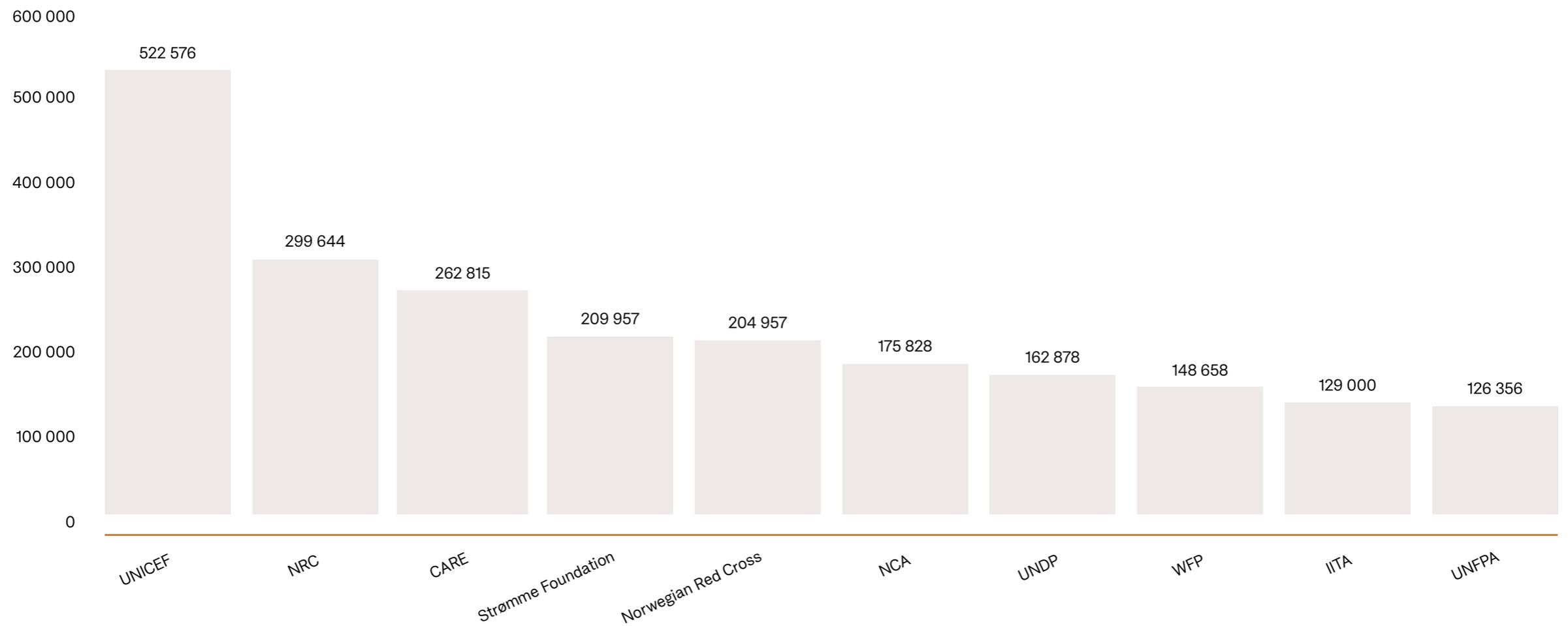




FIGURE 5

The ten agreement partners who received the most earmarked disbursements during the 2016–2021 period

1000 NOK



Source: Norad database 2016–2021 Sahel





4

The findings





The following subsections address each of the evaluation questions individually.

4.1 To what extent do the organisational and management setup and strategic planning enable optimal use of all workforce and expertise to facilitate efficient and effective Norwegian assistance to the Sahel?

Key Finding: The current organisational management system is sub-optimal as it allows for considerable overlap between what the various MFA sections, Norad departments and the Embassy support and does not have a mechanism to ensure systematic exchange of information across agencies or even within agencies. In addition, the monitoring of non-earmarked funding is limited, and monitoring of results emanating from earmarked funds varies according to staff capacity (availability of time) and staff knowledge. Although there have been fluctuations in the number of contracts with grant recipients and available grant resources, the number of staff has remained fairly constant during the period under review. When assessing the ratio of staff members to the number of managed projects, Norad

has consistently maintained a smaller staff count compared to both the MFA in Oslo and the embassy in Bamako. Although making a comparison based solely on staff numbers relative to project management responsibilities is flawed since all staff concerned have additional responsibilities. There are tools and guidelines to assess overall contractual compliance, but none to ensure programmatic implementation of activities. This means that substantive assessment of progress and results is reliant on the individual grant manager's own skill-set, including subject and context knowledge. The lack of tools also affects the systematic assessment of cross-cutting issues. Despite all these shortcomings, Norwegian assistance to the Sahel appears aligned with Norway's strategic goals. The above challenges coupled with lack of sufficiently detailed documentation prevents a clear assessment of the efficiency or effectiveness of many of the interventions.

4.1.1 Staffing and resources

In this subsection, we examine trends related to the volume of disbursements, number of interventions funded and numbers of staff as a way of examining the available staff capacity (person power), and the management of this capacity (capitalisation of available resources) as pertains to Norwegian program support for the Sahel.

The number of projects has consistently increased over the period under review, as have the disbursements in NOK allocated to the region, but the number of grant managers (staff) has remained relatively constant over the same period (see Figure 6). The average number of projects per grant manager was between two and three for the whole period under review (see Table 2). Further analysis reveals that there have been clear differences between agencies regarding the number of projects managed

TABLE 2

Average number of projects and earmarked disbursements per grant manager (2016–2021)

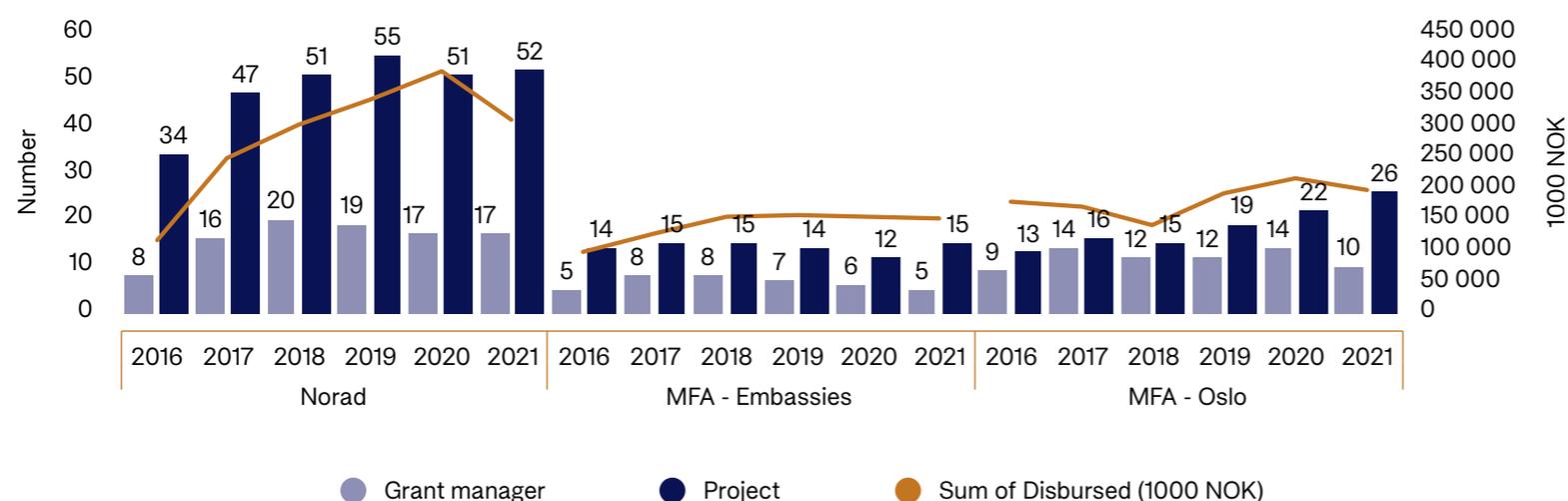
Year	Average project per grant manager	Average disbursement per project (NOK 1000s)
2016	3	6,475
2017	2	7,013
2018	2	7,404
2019	2	7,873
2020	2	8,630
2021	3	7,022
Total	3	7,403

Source: Norad database 2016–2021 Sahel





FIGURE 6
Number of grant managers and projects per agency and earmarked disbursements (2016–2021)



Source: Norad database 2016–2021 Sahel

by each grant manager, with Norad having the least number of staff proportional to the number of agreements managed (see Figure 6).²⁰

A review of disbursements by extending agency shows that the vast majority of resources over the years under review (2016–2021)²¹ have been managed by Norad

²⁰ The evaluation team recognises that Norway has undergone a considerable consolidation of projects and partners, but also notes that this consolidation occurred largely before the period under review. See Norad Department for Evaluation. 2020. Evaluation of Norway's Aid Concentration.

²¹ Data for 2022 were not available when this report was produced (April 2023).

(46.79 %), compared to 30.02% by the MFA in Oslo and 23.19% by embassies (see Figure 6).²²

While more funding does not necessarily require more staff, more agreements usually require more resources to administer them. The absence of systematic tools to enable the programmatic (result focused) monitoring of agreements suggests that the number of agreements relative to the number of grant managers can be a relevant gauge for the degree to which the financial

²² Norad database 2016–2021 Sahel.

commitments made by Norway have been coupled with the staff resources required to effectively manage them.

In addition, staff at different departments, sections and embassies have different types of responsibilities. Within the MFA, there are staff resources dedicated to diplomatic and political engagement and reporting tasks, including management of the embassy in Bamako; monitoring the Sahel engagement; policy and strategic guidance; and providing directives – such as guidance documents and tools that may help standardise project management. For its part, Norad provides technical assistance in the form of subject-area expertise to the MFA, embassies and missions, represents Norway in engagements with several multilateral agencies and funds, and desk officers may also oversee projects outside the Sahel region.²³

Moreover, during the period under review there have been important changes at the embassy level that have affected the effectiveness of aid management. Most notable here was the establishment of an embassy in Bamako in 2017, which meant that several staff were posted to the region with resources to engage, monitor and manage aid interventions. Prior to the establishment of the embassy in Bamako, the embassy in Accra carried the responsibilities now absorbed by the embassy in Bamako. The embassy

²³ See also the interview with the former director general of Norad (and former director general of the OECD DAC Secretariat) in Bolle, T., and Zachrisen, G. 2022. Hårreisende skjevfordeling, mener tidligere Norad-sjef.





in Accra had limited staff overall, but from mid-2016 it did count with the support of a counsellor for Mali.²⁴ Currently, the majority of the interventions funded in the Sahel that are administered by an embassy are managed by the embassy in Bamako.

The opening of the embassy in Bamako has been a notable step forward in terms of improved presence in the region, which has allowed Norway to access information more quickly and secure an improved understanding of contextual conditions on the ground. However, the embassy's opening was not a panacea for challenges with effective management. Staffing at the embassy in Bamako has faced some limitations stemming from the worsening political context in the country. At the time of this evaluation, the embassy in Bamako consisted of five diplomatic staff members (including the administrative head). Until 2022, a defence attaché financed through the Norwegian Ministry of Defence was also stationed at the embassy. Diplomats posted to Bamako serve on a two-year rotation, which is subject to a voluntary one-year extension. Until May 2022, the rest and recreation (R&R) rotation imposed on embassy staff required that all diplomatic staff leave Mali every 12 weeks for a two-week break. Since May 2022, this rotation has changed to a rotation of six weeks on (in Mali) and two weeks off (homestay). This means that most often the embassy is not fully staffed,

²⁴ For more information on staffing and resources at the embassy in Accra, see Royal Norwegian Embassy in Accra. 2017. Virksomhetsplan for 2017. (unpublished)

which in turn requires that staff at the embassy take on the tasks of those who are absent, and hence staff are routinely engaged on issues that are not their primary area of competence (e.g., humanitarian, development and political activities). Challenges with limitations in available diplomatic staff are compounded by challenges involved in securing competent national staff. Notably, the current staffing constellation at the embassy includes an effort to increase the embassy's development-aid capacity following the low score on several dimensions of grant management that the embassy received in a 2019 management review.²⁵ Still, despite the challenges highlighted, having an embassy in Bamako with qualified staff who are francophone and in some instances have in-depth knowledge of the region is an asset in terms of Norwegian participation in donor coordination locally, oversight of activities (although this is hampered by security constraints) and opportunities to inform policy dialogue.

4.1.2 Staff capacity demands, staff resource capitalisation and monitoring ability

In addition to assessing staff distribution, it is important to assess what skills-sets staff need to have and how the available staff resources and capacities are prioritised and capitalised on. A review of the data, documents and interviews suggests that there are three critical factors that affect the ability of staff to

²⁵ See report: Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. 2019. Grant Management Review of the Norwegian Embassy in Bamako, 16 to 23 September 2019.

perform: first, the number of staff, meaning how much time staff members have to oversee activities in the Sahel region; second, the knowledge staff have of the region; and, third, the tools that staff have to monitor the programmatic aspects of the activities they oversee. These three elements are interconnected. Specifically, the data suggest that contextual knowledge and availability of monitoring tools can improve efficiency. This in turn improved efficiency can reduce the need for more staff.

First, on the basis of the information outlined in the previous subsection and the interviews conducted for this evaluation, it has been established that the demands on staff time appear to exceed available time resources – which means that staff often juggle competing priorities.

Second, contextual knowledge is also a challenge. Although anecdotal, it is noteworthy that a number of staff listed as grant managers for interventions funded in the Sahel who were invited to participate in the survey conducted for this evaluation²⁶ or were interviewed commented that their knowledge of the region was at best limited. In addition, the survey revealed that the majority of respondents²⁷ were engaged in Sahel-related activities for a period of time

²⁶ Several grant managers emailed the evaluation team to highlight that they felt ill equipped to respond to the survey because their knowledge of the Sahel was limited.

²⁷ 63.64% of survey respondents (n: 11).





of between one and three years, a length of time that does not permit staff to secure solid regional expertise. Several interview respondents reported that the knowledge that staff have of the region is limited and that geographical knowledge is often not prioritised during staff selection. This is particularly challenging in the Sahel because the area is complex and volatile, and contextual changes that have critical implications for activities on the ground occur frequently.

Third, although earmarked funding is currently followed up by grant managers, the current monitoring process faces challenges. The Grant Management Assistant document provides rules and procedures for managing disbursements to agreement partners, including legal and professional assessments prior to finalising a decision-making document and the grant agreement itself. In addition, there is a monitoring tool, managed by the MFA's Sahel desk, that provides an overview of the activities currently implemented, their status and their alignment with the Sahel strategy (see Subsection 4.3.1). There are also clear rules for which organisations can be awarded resources (core, non-earmarked and earmarked) and under what conditions. However, these tools do not facilitate or guide the substantive follow-up of funded activities. There are no tools that can guide the systematic oversight of implementing partners in relation to the outcomes or impact of funded activities. The lack of systematisation of a robust monitoring system means that all monitoring and oversight depends on the individual grant

manager's personal time and skill-set. In addition, activities in Mali and other regions of the Sahel cannot be effectively third-party monitored – or even visited by Norwegian government staff (embassy, Norad or the MFA in Oslo) owing to security constraints.

Fourth, an additional issue relates to what can be monitored at all. This evaluation found that there are instances where the ability to monitor activities is not linked to the degree of capacity (person power or know-how), but rather to the way in which funding is disbursed and the basic requirements tied to the funding. Important monitoring distinctions exist in relation to how earmarked funding, core funding and non-earmarked programme funding to multilateral institutions are managed. Core funding recipient agencies report the destination country where funds were used to the OECD DAC. Although knowing the proportion of resources that went to which country is useful from a financial perspective, there is currently no mechanism or capacity, at the embassy or otherwise, to enable Norway to clearly understand how non-earmarked funds have been used, what they contributed towards, or whether the contribution represented by those resources was aligned with Norwegian objectives in the region, and, if so, how. Non-earmarked funding faces challenges similar to core funding in terms of monitoring. This is a systems challenge, not one specific to the Sahel. While it allows grantees to use the funds flexibly it does limit Norway's ability to know what it has contributed towards.

4.1.3 Staff capacity and cross-cutting issues

Norwegian aid has identified four cross-cutting issues – anti-corruption, gender equality, climate and environment, and human rights. The evaluation team found that these issues were included in the decision documents consulted. However, how cross-cutting issues should be understood is not well defined in either white papers or policy documents, and there are no operational guidelines that detail how each issue should be understood and/or how to practically include it (i.e., what the meaningful inclusion of a cross-cutting issue might entail).

In addition, interviews conducted during this assignment highlighted that there is confusion regarding how a cross-cutting issue and a main theme should be understood and distinguished from each other. For example, an intervention focused on gender equality may focus on activities that aim to improve gender equality in a particular sector, such as ensuring an increased number of girls in schools, while the incorporation of gender equality as a cross-cutting issue entails ensuring that the way the intervention is designed, implemented, monitored and evaluated includes a gender perspective. This means that there can be interventions focused on improving gender equality that have not integrated gender equality as a cross-cutting issue.



Indeed, while some interview and survey respondents noted that some cross-cutting issues, such as gender equality, are better understood than others, respondents also noted that gender equality is still often understood as the inclusion of women as direct beneficiaries of activities. Some respondents noted that this means that there may be gender implications (positive or negative) of interventions that target men that are overlooked owing to a narrow understanding of what gender equality means. Likewise, there is no clear focus on the inclusion of gender equality into the organisational systems of grantees.

Similarly, what climate change means in relation to activities that are not focused on climate change is also a challenge. Interviewees noted that, when reviewing projects, they are not always sure what they should look for, and implementing actors also seem to have limited awareness and are therefore unable to effectively report on climate change integration. Interventions, for example, do not include climate risk assessments or highlight where relevant disaster risk reduction is responsive to the challenges posed by climate change. Interventions also fail to identify consistent carbon-reduction practices as a clear climate change measure, including, for example how monitoring, reporting or the engagement of partners can impact the carbon footprint of a project.

The types of challenges listed above apply to human rights as well. The only notable exception may be anti-corruption, where guidelines are clearer and there is

a separate unit in the MFA dedicated to this specific area. However, an evaluation of Norway's anti-corruption efforts found that the inclusion of anti-corruption as a cross cutting issue was inconsistent and faced notable operational challenges with some sectors integrating anti-corruption more consistently than others.²⁸ Compounding the general confusion noted above, interview respondents noted that their ability to include cross-cutting issues was hampered by their own limited experience and skills. Interviews conducted for this evaluation suggest that there is currently no systematic training requirement to support the consistent inclusion of all cross-cutting issues. The survey data supported this finding and suggested that some cross-cutting issues, specifically gender equality and human rights, are better integrated than others, and that most often there is a correlation between training and the ability that grant managers have to integrate cross-cutting issues.

4.1.4 Management and strategic setup approaches

The distribution of grant-managing responsibilities between the various departments and sections of the MFA and Norad, as well as between the MFA/Norad and the embassy in Bamako, is clearly defined. However, the delineation of responsibilities allows for different sections or departments to support the same partner or similar interventions, or even the same partner for similar interventions.

²⁸ Norad Department for Evaluation. 2020. Evaluation of Norway's Anti-Corruption Efforts as part of its Development Policy and Assistance.

For example, the MFA's Section for Global Security supported the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime's (UNODC) regional programme in the Sahel to combat terrorism and drugs. The same regional programme is also supported through the Danish–Norwegian Stabilisation in the Sahel programme that is also funded by Norway (see Annex 6). Similarly, the MFA's Section for Human Rights, Democracy and Gender Equality supports the G5 Sahel Joint Force through the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR); at the same time the Danish–Norwegian stabilisation programme also funded the same intervention.

In Niger, Norway supports CARE Norway through different budget posts, managed by different grant-management sections. Specifically, the embassy in Bamako manages support to a major project on rural development and women funded from the Africa regional budget post.²⁹ A related but bigger project is managed by Norad's Section for Gender Equality and funded from the civil society budget chapter post through the framework agreement between Norad and CARE Norway (see Annex 6).

²⁹ The project and Norwegian support for it have a long history that goes back to the early 1990s and CARE's work with agriculture and savings and loan groups. It was the first Norwegian aid-funded project in Niger. The current project was managed by the embassy in Accra before it was transferred to the new Bamako embassy. This point is also highlighted in PRIO. 2022. Review of the Strategy for Norway's Efforts in the Sahel Region 2018 – 2020.





Another challenge concerning management responsibilities is specifically relevant to key long-term development activities. For example, in both Mali and Niger, education is the main sector for Norwegian support. The support to interventions in Niger is managed by the embassy in Bamako, while interventions in Mali are managed by Norad. This means that the Niger engagement may benefit from contextual knowledge, while the Mali interventions will more likely benefit from thematic knowledge.

The support provided to NGOs and local community organisations illustrates another challenge related to the division of labour and synergies. For example, the MFA's Security Department (through the Global Community Engagement and Resilience Fund), Norad's Civil Society Section (especially through the Norwegian Church Aid [NCA]) and the embassy in Bamako (through the Danish–Norwegian stabilisation programme and the MINUSMA Trust Fund) support a range of related peacebuilding/stabilisation initiatives in the same towns in central and northern Mali.³⁰ Such support is managed and disbursed to organisations on the ground, contributing to a very crowded donor landscape.

Relevant to all of the examples above, interviews with Norwegian government staff and documents reviewed showed that there were no systematic

³⁰ This point is also highlighted in PRIO. 2022. Review of the Strategy for Norway's Efforts in the Sahel Region 2018 – 2020.

mechanisms to ensure or benefit from already existing complementarity between interventions where funding or activities appeared to overlap or could potentially support each other. Similarly, there are no mechanisms for capitalising on cross-learning to ensure that lessons learned by one section or department are systematically transferred to another (see also sub-section 4.6).

4.2 To what extent is Norwegian assistance to the sahel relevant and shows flexibility and ability to adapt to the continuously changing contexts and challenges in a conflict-sensitive manner? How does the organisational and management setup affect flexibility and adaptability, if at all?

Key finding: *The findings of this evaluation suggest that the support to the Sahel has been relevant in a number of ways – specifically in terms of Norwegian policies and political priorities and the most pressing needs for right holders in the Sahel region. The support provided has also been flexible and adapted to changes in context, but is heavily reliant on the skills and contextual knowledge of implementing organisations. The management setup, however, is sub-optimal in terms of steering adaptation.*

4.2.1 Relevance to Norwegian policy, political context and Sahelian context

The data reviewed during this evaluation show that Norwegian assistance is highly coherent with Norwegian policies and priorities. These include the key development policy priorities and guidelines and the main foreign policy priorities with their emphasis on stabilisation and the fight against terrorism and crime. Moreover, according to several interview respondents, Norwegian engagement in the Sahel has also been relevant for Norway's bid to become a temporary member of the UN Security Council (2020) and in relation to its tenure in the Security Council (2021–2022). Norway's interest in the UN Security Council has also translated into a Norwegian interest in strengthening the role of the UN and UN agencies, as well as supporting activities by the AU and African institutions. Working with the European Union as a whole, and France more specifically, has also been a priority.

For its part the Sahel is a complex context that has been affected by insecurity, development and environmental challenges. Violent extremism, organised crime and human trafficking are important issues that have required, and continue to require, a coordinated effort to strengthen state capacity and economic development and to address the root causes of insecurity and conflict. Insecurity and conflict are rooted in poverty, marginalisation and weak governance. Regional challenges are





exacerbated by resource scarcity, which makes the need for effective climate change adaptation strategies more pressing. These broader challenges have been compounded by political instability marked by multiple military coups in Mali and several other Sahelian countries, the deteriorating relations between Sahelian countries and several western countries, and multilateral actors, and most recently the influence that Russian has been able to exert through, for example, the Wagner Group.³¹

Within this context, Norwegian support has been relevant. Norwegian funding to the Sahel has focused on humanitarian, development and stability (peace) objectives (triple nexus), through a number of thematic areas that include food security, education, persons with disabilities, peacekeeping and dialogue. In some instances, such as Mali for example, all these areas have been supported in a single country. Within the country, the geographical overlap varies.

Overall, the support has been characterised by working with the governments in the region, building stability around governing authorities and maintaining a consistent focus on the most vulnerable. The support has also included a clear focus on Women, Peace and Security as an important issue in the Sahelian context. The integration of a nexus approach is clear in

³¹ Crisis Group. 2023. Mali: Avoiding the Trap of Isolation.

Norwegian policy documents, but less visible in the activities funded, although there are some interventions that have focused on both humanitarian and development activities and the linkages between the two.

First, although Norway has made an effort to work with government and support stability, as noted earlier, these approaches have become increasingly difficult in relation to Mali and Burkina Faso, but have had more noted success in Niger. The future of MINUSMA itself – a pillar of the Norwegian engagement – is precarious. Most Western countries, including Norway, have withdrawn most of their personnel from MINUSMA.³²

The challenges faced by MINUSMA are compounded by the unclear future of the G5 Sahel Joint Force, which Mali has recently withdrawn from, and the complex status of the relationship between several western countries and the Malian government.³³

Despite Norway's emphasis on working with governments to secure stability, Norway has also supported smaller independent conflict mediation

³² See also UN Security Council. 2023. Internal Review of the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali: Report of the Secretary-General. It is worth noting that by the time of publishing this report the closing down of MINUSMA had become official.

³³ See also UN Security Council. 2023. Internal Review of the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali: Report of the Secretary-General.

and peacebuilding efforts. The challenges of working with governments may be circumvented through these processes. Norway has also been very proactive in promoting the Resolution 1325 Women, Peace and Security agenda through involving women in the follow-up committees for the implementation of the 2015 peace accord.

BOX 1:

Democratic ideas without democratic histories

An important challenge mentioned by some respondents was related to the pursuit of democratic models in contexts where democratic foundations are lacking.

The idea that including women, for example, would mean that they would automatically be representatives for women in discussions was ill-founded. While women's representation is positive and sends a clear signal about inclusivity, this does not necessarily mean that those included represent a specific constituency.

Understanding a particular context and its limitations is critical for understanding what can be achieved. Indeed, how a 'peace' may be achieved in the Sahel, what actors will be involved, and what type of inclusivity may be required are critical questions that some respondents believe need to be asked.





Although Norway has made its long-term commitment clear, the challenges mentioned earlier in this section make for a complex environment to operate within. Indeed, some interview respondents highlighted that it is important to ask critical questions about the support provided and, specifically, of the achievements of this support. For example, at what stage should Norway reconsider its support for the participation of women in talks if talks are not taking place in the first place? When is it appropriate to reassess engagement and recognise that, despite the best efforts, the likelihood of success is limited?

Second, attention to the most vulnerable has been considerable (large volume) and predictable. However, there have been fewer efforts to address the implications of changing political context and the implications this may have for efforts to respond to the needs of right holders. For example, Norway supports several French NGOs in the Sahel, and several of the interventions supported by Norway also receive substantial funding from France. This has major implications, especially in relation to the Norwegian engagement in Mali and the French exit from the country. The evaluation team found no evidence of any response to these issues – and several of those interviewed said that they were waiting for direction from the MFA in Oslo.

Third, specific attention has been placed on Women, Peace and Security, specifically in Mali. This has been a Norwegian policy focus in general and one that has

been highlighted both during Norway's tenure in the Security Council and in its Sahel strategy.

Lastly, the integration between development, humanitarian aid and stability is strongly emphasised in Norwegian policy documents, also in relation to the Sahel. Activities funded by Norway have aimed to address multiple areas of the nexus continuum. The MFA's Sahel Monitoring Tool lists some 20 interventions addressing integration – ranging from core funding to the World Bank to projects implemented by NRC. From a financial contribution perspective, the majority of resources are used to fund humanitarian aid, support to education in the Lake Chad area and food security activities. Although the nexus dimension is noted in policy documents, the majority of the interventions focus on a single support approach – humanitarian, development or peace. Exceptions to this include a limited number of engagements in food security where support has included both emergency food support (humanitarian) and efforts to strengthen long-term food availability.³⁴

Norway's approach to ensuring project relevance and adaptability in volatile contexts involves entrusting the responsibility to implementing partners. These partners are tasked with aligning the projects with local contexts and taking into account all conflict

³⁴ A number of examples of this are presented in the second report associated with this evaluation, Evaluation of Norwegian Aid to the Sahel: Food Security in Mali.

sensitivity issues. Notably, Norway refrains from evaluating the quality of partners' conflict sensitivity approach, and it does not provide guidance on how conflict sensitivity should be ensured, or even clarify its own understanding of the term. As a result, while the relevance of funded interventions can be assessed at a broad scope level, at the project-specific level, Norway heavily relies on the competence of its implementing partners and their partners. Indeed, in some instances, Norwegian-funded organisations directly collaborate with local partners, which means that the responsibility for ensuring conflict sensitivity and ongoing relevance may with organisation who do not have any direct engagement with Norway.

4.2.2 Flexibility, adaptation and communication

Norwegian aid has traditionally conjured up an image of flexibility and adaptability to changing contexts. These qualities have been emphasised in some evaluations of Norwegian support³⁵ and are exemplified by the degree of freedom granted to (and even encouraged among) funded partners.

Respondents agreed that Norway has been able to adapt to contextual changes and demands. However, it was also highlighted that there is no standardised process governing how changes are made, what

³⁵ See Norad Department for Evaluation. 2016. Striking the Balance: Evaluation of the Planning Organisation and Management of Norwegian Assistance Related to the Syria Regional Crisis.





precipitates them or how the context is assessed. Individual projects that receive support are managed by a grant manager who is responsible for oversight and for ensuring that the relevant decision documents are followed and that activities deliver on their objectives. However, the grant manager does not have at their disposal tools that may help them assess the context on a regular basis and prompt any necessary adaptations, nor do they have risk assessments that are updated at regular intervals or updated on the basis of changes in the relevant context (i.e., it is unclear what may trigger an update). Instead, agreement partners are expected to conduct their own context and conflict analyses and risk assessments, using their own tools, and to flag the existence of any issues that arise. These documents are assessed by the responsible grant managers. Depending on the level of urgency involved, this may be done at the annual meeting at which project implementation and adjustment are discussed by the implementing partner and the grant manager, or may be raised on an ad hoc basis at the discretion of the agreement partner. In some instances, such discussions, as well as annual meetings, may also include representatives from other MFA or Norad sections/departments. All changes to implementation need to be approved by heads of department or the responsible ambassador.

On the one hand, the current approach to project management is very organic and allows implementing partners to decide if and when adaptations are

needed. It also places considerable responsibility on grantees to identify and react to contextual changes. On the other hand, the lack of systematic processes for assessing context makes Norway vulnerable to a possible deficit in contextual understanding.

Despite noted shortcomings, thus far it appears that adaptations have been possible when they are required. In Mali, for example, activities have been moved from one region to another because security risks made it impossible to continue activities as initially planned. In the absence of an impact assessment for each intervention, however, it is difficult to ascertain whether all necessary adaptations have been made. Indeed, some respondents raised concerns that Norway is very understanding of the contextual challenges faced by implementing organisations and may continue to fund interventions even after a project stops producing results owing to a sense of duty or a commitment to the implementing partner. Other respondents, however, expressed the view that Norway is rigorous and stringent when it comes to cutting off funding if results are not materialising. Given that there are no tools for systematically assessing performance, the only way in which these distinct views might be evaluated would be through a longitudinal assessment of interventions funded. This is outside the scope of the present evaluation. However, the limited capacity to effectively monitor activities suggests that there is a clear risk that interventions that are not delivering will continue to receive funding. What all

respondents agreed on was that a considerable amount of decision-making power rests with the grant manager and that there are limited tools available to help grant managers systematically assess particular activities and their results, evaluate contextual shifts, or assess the pros and cons of programming modifications.

4.2.3 Organisational setup

Norwegian aid management has become increasingly standardised and centralised over the last few years.³⁶ This development has been coupled with the increasing standardisation of grant management to ensure that processes are in line with the system (rules and procedures) for grant management in the Norwegian public sector.³⁷ Relationships between the MFA in Oslo, Norad and the embassies are managed in accordance with the rules and procedures established by the Ministry of Finance. The rules imposed by the Ministry of Finance include the issuing of formal and detailed appropriation letters from the MFA to Norad and the embassies.

Norad's grant-management and operational responsibilities have increased since 2019. Norad has also undergone a major reorganisational process

³⁶ Norad Department for Evaluation. 2018. Evaluation of the Norwegian Aid Administration's Practices of Results-Based Management; Norad Department of Evaluation. 2020. Evaluation of Norway's Aid Concentration.

³⁷ Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. 2021. Grant Management Assistant (unpublished), extracted on 21.08.2021 from Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs website.





that ended in 2021 with the introduction of a new organisational setup based on thematic divisions (anchored on the Sustainable Development Goals). A stronger emphasis on portfolio management is also emerging within Norad. Several portfolios are being established, including one on food security.

Specifically, the MFA's Section for the Horn of Africa and West Africa is responsible for oversight of the Sahel region. This section has two individuals (including the special envoy) working full-time on the Sahel. Their tasks include engagement in high-level diplomatic activities relevant to the region, such as representing Norway in the Sahel Alliance, and maintaining the Sahel Monitoring Tool (see Section 4.3). The division of labour between the MFA, Norad and the embassy in Bamako do not appear optimal for managing a highly complex set of interventions in a volatile and fragile context. However, it is important to acknowledge that, within existing mechanisms and structures, the current division of tasks and responsibilities between the MFA in Oslo, the embassy in Bamako and Norad may be the best possible solution.

When examining the above constellation of structures/systems and responsibilities it is clear that there is a move towards standardisation of systems, and for a focus towards establishing a common vision within thematic areas (e.g., food security, health), which could lead to a move away from a more comprehensive geographic based understanding of the support

(e.g., what is the totality of support to the Sahel focusing on). How this focus affects flexibility of the support provided is unclear at this time. Given the traditionally flexible approach that Norway has taken, it can be expected this will not be affected.

4.3 To what extent is the Norwegian engagement coordinated, both internally and externally?

Key finding: *Both internal and external coordination are limited. Internal coordination relies on policies and strategies that serve to ensure that support is aligned with Norwegian priorities. In addition, there is a Sahel Monitoring Tool that enables the alignment and oversight of activities as these relate to the strategy, and a number of meetings are held within sections and departments and with country focal points, all of which aid coordination. However, despite these efforts and tools, coordination across departments, sections and embassies is limited due to a number of factors, including that meetings tend to not engage across departments and sections, there is an institutional siloed approach to managing funded efforts (each section or department is singularly responsible, and there is no institutional incentive for coordinating with other sections or departments), there is a lack of tools that can serve to ensure a common understanding of key areas of work (e.g., how to understand and fully implement cross-cutting issues, conflict sensitivity,*

risk assessment) and the current monitoring tools are weak. Externally, the engagement is largely focused on information exchange rather than coordination of efforts, with the notable exception of initiatives that are co-funded by multiple donors. Additionally, the resources available to engage in coordination meetings is limited.

4.3.1 Internal coordination

Political directives, policy documents, and rules and procedures governing management provide the framework for the Norwegian engagement in the Sahel. Still, the relationships between different interventions related to the Sahel, between different interventions with a similar objective, different objectives within the same sector, or different support to the same agreement or implementing partner remain a challenge, as was highlighted in Section 4.1. Indeed, most coordination remains within the individual grant-managing section/department at Norad or the MFA or within the embassy responsible for the task.

The main tool that can facilitate coordination is the so-called Sahel Monitoring Tool. The Sahel Monitoring Tool is managed by the Sahel desk (situated within the Section for the Horn of Africa and West Africa at the MFA in Oslo) and aims to map, keep track of and assess the totality of the Norwegian engagement in the Sahel region in relation to each of the objectives





and sub-objectives in the Sahel strategy.³⁸ The most recent version lists over 160 interventions, of which over 130 are classified as ongoing or planned.

The main contribution of the tool is twofold: First, it enables those who oversee the implementation of the Sahel strategy to remain up to date on what has been done in pursuit of strategic objectives. Second, the tool provides those working in the region with the opportunity to secure a broader, but loose, understanding of what else is being done in the region. Having an overview of activities can facilitate synergies between activities.

The Monitoring Tool suffers from a number of weaknesses, however. It is dependent upon the provision and updating of information by grant managers. The level of priority given to updating the tool varies. Indeed, of the 130 interventions classified as ongoing or planned, details for only 50 had been updated between June 2022 and March 2023. The lack of importance given to the tool is also supported by information collected during interviews, in which the value of the tool as an operational asset was questioned. In addition – and this is perhaps why

³⁸ The team consulted the version from the second half of 2022 (last updated in June 2022) and the version from April 2023 (last updated in March 2023). The Monitoring Tool is maintained in the form of an Excel document and is available as a shared folder for MFA, Norad and embassy staff. The mapping also includes certain political engagements and covers the wider Sahel region, including the Lake Chad basin.

there appears to be a lack of commitment to updating the information – the Monitoring Tool provides limited, if any, information on what is being achieved. The contribution made by a project is assessed using a minimalist approach (traffic-light). Another challenge mentioned by some respondents with experience of reporting on activities that they oversee via the Monitoring Tool was the lack of clear guidance on how activities should be assessed. This meant that individual grant managers could, to a degree, determine how to qualify individual activities.³⁹

In addition to the Monitoring Tool, the Sahel desk has weekly meetings with the relevant embassies. Other MFA sections and Norad country focal points are invited to take part in these meetings, which serve as an opportunity to share information. Lastly, the Sahel desk also convenes informal Sahel Forum meetings, which are intended to bring together staff from the MFA, Norad and Norwegian NGOs, as well as other (external) relevant stakeholders, such as researchers. Interviewees who had participated in Sahel Forum meetings highlighted their value, but also noted they are ad hoc and infrequent gatherings.

³⁹ The inclusion of activities in the Lake Chad area is one example where the parameters for determining whether a particular activity should be classified as part of Norway's engagement in the Sahel region are unclear. This means that one grant manager might choose to identify certain activities as contributing to the Sahel strategy, whereas another grant manager may not.

Within Norad, there are no specific coordination mechanisms to cover the Sahel. However, special focal points have been appointed at Norad for Norway's partner countries to facilitate communication with the MFA and the embassy in Bamako. The focal point relevant to the Sahel is one Norad staff member responsible for both Mali and Niger, who can dedicate 10% of their work time to this task. The limited time resources allocated to being a focal point are mainly spent on participating in the weekly meetings of the Sahel desk and responding to queries from the MFA and the embassy in Bamako. Broadly speaking, the focal point is a contact person who facilitates both external and internal communication on the Sahel within Norad, but not necessarily a subject area expert.

Despite the efforts mentioned above, the data collected during this evaluation suggest that coordination between the MFA in Oslo, Norad and the relevant embassies is limited. The evaluation team observed – and this was confirmed by almost everyone interviewed – that information-sharing is highly dependent on individuals. Some are committed to this and find it useful; others do not prioritise it. This is particularly relevant since there are multiple opportunities for possible funding duplication (along with examples of such), as well as potentials for complementarity (see section 3.3)





Lack of coordination has been highlighted by other evaluations. For example, a 2021 evaluation of support to the education sector concluded that the greatest shortcomings and weaknesses at the portfolio level related to weak interaction, cooperation and knowledge-sharing between agreement partners.^{40, 41}

4.3.2 External coordination

External coordination is emphasised in Norwegian policy documents and strategies. Much of the Norwegian support is channelled through multilateral institutions and funds, as well as other bilateral donor agencies that enjoy delegated authority.

At the international level the Norwegian Special envoy for the Sahel is mandated to represent Norway. Also, Norway has joined, and reports activities to, the Sahel Alliance, a coordinating body set up in 2017.⁴² The ability to take part and engage in donor coordination meetings in Mali is limited and uneven. In Mali, donor coordination meetings are sometimes attended by staff from the embassy in Bamako, but interview respondents noted that their ability to take part in these meetings is hampered

⁴⁰ See West, A. et al. 2021. Portfolio Review: Supporting Civil Society in Education 2017–2021.

⁴¹ Lack of coordination between interventions is illustrated in the second report associated with this evaluation, Evaluation of Norwegian Aid to the Sahel: Food Security in Mali.

⁴² See the website of the Sahel Alliance at: <https://www.alliance-sahel.org/en/>.

by staff constraints and that these meetings tend to stay at a high strategic level and do not venture into programmatic challenges. As a result, these meetings do not provide an opportunity for operational coordination, but rather tend to serve as an information-sharing platform. The limited staff resources at the embassy in Bamako also mean that opportunities to engage in coordination meetings in other countries in the region are limited, as is the embassy's ability to remain updated on activities funded through entities that have delegated authority, such as the Danish–Norwegian stabilisation fund. There are efforts to remain informed of activities which are co-funded.

In terms of coordination between funded entities, as well as between Norway and funded entities, there are also some shortcomings. According to interview respondents, including both Norwegian government staff and grantees, Norway does not encourage or facilitate coordination between funded partners. As with internal coordination, external coordination can impact the reduction of duplication of interventions.

4.4 To what extent do the different Norwegian strategies affecting the Sahel engagement facilitate a coherent and conflict-sensitive approach? To what extent are these strategies helpful for prioritising the support?

Key finding: *The current Sahel strategy is an important reference document that has served to ensure that all interventions are aligned with key overarching Norwegian objectives. The country strategies have not been so widely used as guidance documents. Critically, the Sahel strategy and other key strategies highlight conflict sensitivity and gender, and specifically Women, Peace and Security, as key issues that require particular attention in the Sahelian context. These strategies have played an important role in prioritising areas of support, but political priorities, which may not always align with broader strategies, also determine the focus of Norwegian aid.*

There are a number of political documents, strategies and action plans that impact Norwegian engagement in the Sahel region. In addition, there are several Sahel-specific guidelines, including the Strategy for the Sahel and the country-specific strategies for Mali and Niger. The utility of some of the key documents in relation to priority selection, facilitating coherence and ensuring conflict sensitivity is discussed here.





The Strategy for the Sahel: Interview respondents from the MFA in Oslo, the embassy in Bamako and Norad generally agreed that both the 2018–2020 and the 2021–2025 Strategies for the Sahel have been important reference documents that have helped provide a coherent framework for Norway's engagement in the region. This view is supported by decision documents and reviews conducted.⁴³ The material reviewed also shows that these strategies have been helpful in communicating Norwegian engagement and priorities in the region with stakeholders, including other donors.⁴⁴ The general view of the two versions of the Strategy for the Sahel was that it sets out Norwegian objectives and priorities, along with the types of activities supported, thus allowing for the development of a coherent portfolio, but is not prescriptive in terms of outlining an action plan of what should be done when or by whom. The strategy is not an action plan with clear objectives, timelines and prescriptions.

A limited number of respondents noted that the Sahel strategy was used to highlight Norway's priorities and strategic objectives in discussions with external actors. Overall, the consensus among interviewees was that the document was not an active element of their toolbox – a view that was reinforced by survey respondents, who generally agreed that the document fell within the categories

43 PRIO. 2022. Review of Norway's Efforts in the Sahel Region 2018–2020.

44 PRIO. 2022. Review of Norway's Efforts in the Sahel Region 2018–2020.

of 'somewhat useful' or 'very useful', although half of them felt the document did not add value in terms of their ability to perform their tasks.

The strategy also highlights the importance of an integrated approach in which development, humanitarian and stability activities are interlinked. The Norwegian version of the strategy (in a section that is not included in the English and French versions) highlights the high risks involved in providing support to the Sahel and states that conflict sensitivity and understanding of the context are crucial both for avoiding unintended negative consequences and for increasing the potential for positive results. It is worth noting that the emphasis on Women, Peace and Security in the strategy has facilitated a focus on this area.

The country strategies: In addition to the Strategy for the Sahel, there are country strategies for Mali and Niger (the latter was first published in 2021 on the MFA website but has been unavailable since mid-2022), which were generally considered to be less useful by interview respondents. Indeed, a number of respondents reported that they were not familiar with these documents. Interestingly, however, in the survey, the country strategies received a score similar to that of the overarching Strategy for the Sahel. Notably, the country strategies are only available in Norwegian and hence less useful to non-Norwegian stakeholders.

Thematic and general policy aid strategies: Other thematic and general foreign and development-aid policies are also important guiding documents. For example, in addition to the specific mention of conflict sensitivity in the Strategy for the Sahel, other strategy documents, such as the strategy that focuses on Norwegian engagement in Conflict Prevention, Stabilisation and Resilience building (a document largely informed by experiences from South Sudan, Somalia and Afghanistan)⁴⁵ and Norway's Humanitarian Strategy,⁴⁶ provide further insights into the official approach to responding to conflict and ensuring conflict sensitivity.

In its operational guidelines, the 2017 strategy for engaging in fragile states declares:

Conflict sensitivity is a matter of understanding the local conditions and how our activities may affect the situation on the ground. By ensuring that we have a better understanding of the context in which we are working, we can avoid unintended negative effects and increase our chances of achieving positive results. This applies to all our efforts, regardless of whether we are supporting a project aimed directly at achieving peace, or whether we are providing funding to alleviate suffering and promote development in a conflict

45 Utenriksdepartementet. 2017. Strategisk rammeverk for norsk innsats i sårbare stater og regioner

46 Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. 2018. Norway's Humanitarian Strategy.





situation.... We will be flexible and respond rapidly but plan long-term. Flexibility, in particular in terms of funding, is one of Norway's strengths. It enables us to act quickly and make use of windows of opportunity for engagement. However, our efforts must be based on a coherent and long-term strategy. We will make greater use of pilot projects to try out different approaches.

Likewise, the 2018 Humanitarian Strategy calls for the coordination of humanitarian efforts, long-term development assistance and peacebuilding. Another relevant thematic document is the Women, Peace and Security (2019–2022) action plan, which highlights four focus areas: (1) peace and reconciliation processes, (2) implementation of peace agreements, (3) operations and missions, and (4) humanitarian efforts.

These strategies are helpful insofar as they identify key challenges related to conflict sensitivity and how it can be managed, and stress areas requiring specific attention, such as Women, Peace and Security. However, applying such insights in practice can be a difficult task. The Norwegian Sahel engagement during the evaluation period is also the history of a donor willing to take risks and take advantage of windows of opportunity in support of the implementation of the Algiers Peace Accord.

However, Norwegian efforts to support the Sahel, and follow its strategic objectives, have been challenged by the presence of military-run governments which take an authoritarian direction and cut ties with key

Western players. How best to promote peacebuilding and development in politically complex environments where the government priorities may not be aligned with those of Norway is an important and ever-present question.

Overall, the available documents have facilitated coherence and supported the importance of a conflict-sensitive approach. By providing a set of regional (Sahel) and thematic (humanitarian, Women, Peace and Security) priorities, which are examined together in the identification of Norwegian focus in the region. The notable exception to the weaving together of strategic priorities is found in the use of country strategies, which seem to have been overshadowed by the development of the Sahel strategy. In no instance, however, have there been contradictions of focus, but rather a growing refinement of what is important to Norway, which is illustrated by the different Sahel strategies, and underlined by the thematic strategies.

As pertains to conflict sensitivity specifically, the strategies are useful in clearly highlighting the importance that Norway places on the issue. However, the strategies have not been accompanied by mechanism to ensure that a conflict-sensitive approach is applied at a more granular level. The strategies, as can be expected of such a document, highlight the importance of conflict sensitivity and identify key issues of concern. As mentioned elsewhere in this report, how conflict sensitivity is operationalised has been delegated to grantees.

The emphasis of these documents can be and is overshadowed by Norwegian political priorities. Indeed, changes in these priorities result in adaptations to the support provided. The degree to which these changes best support previous strategic decisions and longer-term humanitarian, development or peace objectives may vary. Critically, the refocus of support must also be seen in relation to the context and the opportunities that Norway has to engage on the ground. A shift away from education and towards food security can also be understood as responding to the local context. For example, as security has become an increasing threat the provision of education has become increasingly restricted. The experience in the Sahel is that despite shifts, the support has remained relevant, but the evaluation team would be remiss if it did not highlight that shifting priorities can affect the attainment of sustainable results and that given the complexity of the region often interventions, if threatened by increasing instability, can be adapted or relocated, as has been the case with some interventions in Mali.⁴⁷

⁴⁷ Norad Department for Evaluation. 2023. Evaluation of Norwegian Aid Engagement in the Sahel – Report 2 – Food Security in Mali.





4.5 What is the rationale behind the choice of partners? What assessments are carried out by Norway when selecting partners (including in relation to conflict sensitivity and coordinating with other donors in selecting partners)?

Key finding: *The selection of partners tends to focus on larger organisations that are well known to Norway as experienced actors in a specific theme. The actual selection is based on pre-established and clear procedures for selection. Selected funding recipients must meet key criteria to be selected. Norway expects all funded parties to be responsible for relevant conflict-sensitivity assessment and for integrating cross-cutting issues. There is no detailed toolbox with tools that may serve to ensure that all actors understand and implement crosscutting issues and conflict sensitivity in a consistent, comparable, or systematic way.*

Traditionally Norway has focused its funding on multilateral institutions, multilateral funds, Norwegian and international NGOs, and to a limited extent government institutions. These same patterns have been found in the Sahel.

Norway supports a relatively small number of partners in the Sahel (about 35 in 2021, excluding support to public-sector institutions and bilateral donor agencies). The selection of partners is based on the requirements and priorities of individual budget chapter posts in the Norwegian aid budget, the priorities listed in the Sahel and/or country strategies, and political priorities for engagement.

Different budget posts identify grantees differently. The civil society budget post (often referred to as the 'civil society grant') identifies grantees in one of two ways. Either NGOs respond to a call for proposals or larger Norwegian NGOs may apply for multi-year framework agreements with Norad. The selection of these NGOs is not based on geographic country or regional priorities, but on the quality of the thematic application. Applicants are themselves at liberty to determine the geographic location or focus of their interventions. Accordingly, these framework contracts do not specifically target the Sahel. In contrast, the education budget post gives priority to multilateral institutions and funds.

In addition, individual departments and their sections will adhere to policy guidelines and prescriptions derived from other government priorities. The Security Department and the Section for Global Security at the MFA, for example, have a strong focus on stabilisation, the European neighbourhood, and concerns related to terrorism, radical Islam and crime.

This informs their partner selection. The Humanitarian Section at the MFA has its own priorities derived from humanitarian appeals from the UN and the ICRC, and works through the main multilateral humanitarian institutions and a few strategic Norwegian NGO partners that hold partnership agreements (selected through an application process). Overall, the selection process focuses largely on the grantee's subject area competence, and not on a systematic assessment of their ability to ensure cross-cutting issues are effectively addressed, risks are well understood and can be mitigated and conflict sensitivity is applied to the work. Organisations are expected to understand the aforementioned issues and mention them in their tenders, but their application is the responsibility of the grantee. In this sense, Norway relies considerably on a presumption that grantees have the capacity needed to apply all issues in an effective way.

In some instances, Norway delegates the responsibility for selecting partners. For example, the Danish–Norwegian stabilisation programme is managed through the Danish embassy in Bamako. The Danish embassy in Bamako enjoys a delegated-authority agreement with the Norwegian government under which it will inform Norway of decisions made, and select partners partly on the basis of a call for proposals from NGOs. Norway can, however, make suggestions regarding priorities and engage and programme follow up, but the Danish embassy meets grant management obligations.





The concentration of Norwegian aid has implied a preference for trusted partners able to absorb bigger grants.⁴⁸ Some partners have been selected because they are well known as subject-area experts and/or because they are known and trusted to be reliable/dependable partners able to deliver. Despite a general focus on larger agencies, there are examples of support for smaller organisations with very specific areas of competence. One example of this is the Norwegian support through the Section for Peace and Reconciliation to the French NGO Promediation. This NGO was established with MFA support in 2014 (the founder of the organisation was known to the MFA from previous engagement in the mediation sector). Another example is the Bamako embassy-managed support to the Malian École de Maintien de la Paix Alioune Blondin Beye de Bamako.

In relation to conflict sensitivity and cross-cutting issues, there is an expectation that all partners will be able to meet the relevant demands, but there are no mechanisms or systematic tools for assessing the degree to which relevant cross-cutting issues are integrated into a partner's organisational structure – for example, a requirement for gender equality policies that include key criteria or a requirement for climate change and environmental policies that ensure that the organisation is addressing key issues. Nor did the evaluation team find any evidence of in-depth

systematic and regularly updated conflict-sensitivity assessments that examined how the funded activity itself, or the donors secured to support the activity, could positively or negatively affect the level of conflict. Conflict sensitivity assessments do not follow a standard protocol for either how they should be conducted, what they should include, or how regularly they should be updated. However, it is worth noting that Norad has engaged, during the period under review, in a systematic focus on standardised organisational reviews of partner NGOs rather than just on the review of funded programmes. This process is used to ensure that NGO partners meet the basic criteria for engaging in activities. Similarly, some sections at the MFA do assess the organisations they fund, but the assessment guidelines are internal and developed by the individual sections. Aside from fiduciary and legal requirements (audits, registrations, etc.), there are no systematic mechanisms used across sections, departments and agencies that detail the organisational capacities or institutional characteristics that grantees must possess in order to secure funding.

Overall, while remaining true to strategic priorities, the selection of partners focuses on **work with known partners** because there is a perception that known entities can be trusted to deliver and require less oversight. However, this perception may or may not hold true since organisations can change over time.

4.6 To what extent does Norway ensure that lessons and experiences gained from its ongoing operations, from partners and from research evidence are used for learning and to adjust the strategic direction of Norwegian assistance?

Key finding: *The degree to which lessons are learned and capitalised upon is heavily dependent on the interest and commitment of the individuals involved in any particular activity. The current systems do not promote reflection and learning, and often limit the degree of reflection and learning owing to the limited resources (person time) available. There are, however, some opportunities – both routine and ad hoc – that may facilitate learning and make it possible for Norwegian staff across different entities (the MFA in Oslo, Norad and the embassies) to redirect attention or make adjustments based on information gained.*

48 Norad Department for Evaluation. 2020. Evaluation of Norway's Aid Concentration.





4.6.1 Internal government architecture

At the MFA in Oslo, the embassies and Norad, the principal opportunity for information exchange and historical memory is provided by the organisational archives, which allow for documentation on funded interventions, communications and assessments, among other documents, to be secured. The archives are expected to provide new staff members with a ‘full picture’ of what has taken place before their arrival. In addition to the archives, there is a handover mechanism under which departing staff are expected to compile a handover document and brief their successor. On the one hand, this process is quite standard in relation to how ministries operate when staff turnover (changing positions) is prevalent, and it meets basic requirements of information exchange and historical memory.

On the other hand, this approach must be examined within the Sahelian context – one that is highly volatile, constantly changing, and where actors and dynamics are in flux. The nature of the Sahelian context means that securing a full grasp of the conditions and realities of that context may be far more demanding than would be the case for a different geographic area where conditions are more stable.

Interview respondents consistently agreed that within a context such as that of the Sahel, a staff member’s most valuable asset is their existing knowledge of and interest in the region. The need for such knowledge

and interest was underlined by a consistent realisation among interviewees that Sahel-related capacity, not least francophone linguistic competence, is limited within the MFA and Norad and that this has impacted Norway’s abilities to learn and adapt from its own experience and that of others.

Discussions held with MFA and Norad staff during the conduct of this evaluation revealed that interactions between the MFA and Norad were largely ad hoc and based on ‘invitations’ that could be reciprocal but were not mandated. This in turn means that while some opportunities for information-sharing and co-learning are capitalised on, many are not.

The aforementioned shortcomings aside, within the MFA, the monitoring tool used to keep tabs on how activities respond to the demands of the Sahel strategy provides an opportunity for sharing information between desks at the MFA. Moreover, within departments, there is routine information-sharing regarding partners and progress that permits different desks both to learn and to potentially adapt their own activities. Likewise, the embassy in Bamako is a considerable source of information that can help staff in Oslo better understand local challenges and conditions and how to best mitigate the challenges encountered.

One area where information-sharing used to be conducted on a consistent basis was that of Women, Peace and Security. Interview respondents who were

familiar with activities focused on Women, Peace and Security and had been engaged in such activities for a longer period of time noted that regular meetings between Oslo representatives, including the envoy for Women, Peace and Security, and embassies implementing activities that had a Women, Peace and Security focus were very valuable for information-sharing and knowledge-capitalisation. However, such meetings currently do not take place on a regular basis.

At an overall level, interviewees highlighted that generating high-level lessons was a challenge. However, some respondents also noted that the new emphasis on portfolio-level management introduced at Norad may in time help mitigate this through the use of more impact and real-time evaluations. However, there was also concern that the focus on themes, with limited focus on geographical areas, would not be so useful to areas such as the Sahel where context is an important factor in determining success. In addition, this shift at Norad does not serve to improve the sharing of experiences or the identification of lessons or learning across the different agencies and departments. As noted earlier in this document, follow-up of core and unearmarked support is a challenge, which in turn means that lessons derived from these experiences are lost.





4.6.2 External knowledge opportunities

In addition to in-house sources, the MFA, Norad and the embassy in Bamako make use of external sources of information, such as research, to improve their understanding of the Sahel region. Indeed, the Sahel Forum was intended to serve such a purpose. However, the Sahel Forum is at best ad hoc, and therefore its value remains under-used.

The most prominent 'external' source of data at the present time is reporting from grantee organisations. Such reporting provides an important opportunity for the responsible desk or department (i.e., within the MFA in Oslo, Norad or the embassies) to improve their understanding of conditions on the ground. Here, however, it is important to note that, owing to security-related challenges, it is currently not possible for Norwegian government staff to monitor several activities funded by Norway, including all activities in Mali that are being implemented outside Bamako. This means that opportunities for direct learning are more limited.

Interview respondents who engaged in meetings with other donors highlighted that the exchange of information with other donors tended to take place at a higher (strategic) level rather than focusing on programmatic experiences, and the knowledge obtained from such exchange that might be used to improve on-the-ground implementation of activities is limited (see sub-section 4.3.2).

Overall, staff interviewed widely agreed that opportunities for learning were often not fully capitalised on. At the same time, the prioritisation of learning has its own costs: a focus on learning means the immediate loss of active capacity. The critical question here is whether the loss of active capacity for learning may deliver better returns in the long run. One area where the returns might be particularly positive is that of capacity development combined with a focus on national staff.



Photo: Gunnar Zachrisen | Panorama





5

Conclusion





This evaluation found that Norwegian organisational and management structures **managing the support to the Sahel** face clear limitations and do not make the best possible use of available staff resources. While the possibilities for carrying out fundamental changes to those structures are limited due to limitations imposed by the existing organisational structures and available staff capacity, there are important opportunities for to facilitate the efficiency and effectiveness of the MFA in Oslo, the embassies and Norad. Ensuring dialogue between all three entities and developing or refining tools that facilitate donor oversight can be important mechanisms to achieve improved oversight. The latter can also serve to ensure that key principles of Norwegian aid are consistently integrated into programming. For example: conflict sensitivity, risk management, and cross cutting issues.

The evaluation also found that **coordination** between sections and departments at the MFA and Norad and relevant embassies, along with coordination with other actors, was sub-optimal. Although the relevant strategic documents provide a good basis for coordination and serve to ensure that activities are well aligned with Norwegian priorities, the lack of systematic mechanisms to ensure ongoing dialogue between different desks at Norad, the MFA and relevant embassies limits the degree to which efforts are coordinated. Moreover, as pertains to activities on the same theme being managed by different sections, while more grant managers engaging in similar

interventions could allow for the capitalisation of complementary skill-sets and sharing of perspectives, experiences and insights, lack of coordination between agencies and grant-management sections has negated the potential added value of overlap in thematic grant management. Lastly, improved coordination can also serve to ensure that a nexus approach is capitalised on wherever possible.

Likewise, lack of staff resources (person time) limits the degree of coordination between Norwegian-funded activities and efforts by other donors, and there is currently no effort to ensure that grantees coordinate with each other when working on similar areas geographically or thematically, or to encourage them to do so. The current system does not lend itself to the promotion of an integrated approach that is effectively monitored and facilitates learning at the portfolio level.

Despite the challenges related both to the existing organisational and management structures and to coordination between the various relevant actors, the data consistently show that the support provided to the Sahel (1) **is well aligned with strategic objectives** and (2) **is relevant to the Sahelian context**.

However, there are instances where the degree of the continued relevance of activities is unclear – specifically, given contextual changes, can activities be expected to deliver on what they were initially expected to achieve?

The selection of partners deliberately chooses to **work with known partners** because it is felt that as known entities, they can be trusted to deliver and require less oversight. Such an approach has some clear advantages in that it allows Norway to know in advance what it might expect, to build on longstanding relationships and to be familiar with the working modalities of its partners. However, there are challenges and missed opportunities here, too. Specifically, in some instances, reliance on established relationships with funded partners can make the halting of projects/programmes that are not delivering more difficult, a challenge that is further exacerbated by the lack of strict mechanisms for assessing progress. Focusing only on known partners can also lead to overlooking organisations that may have better/improved approaches that can support Norwegian objectives.

Lastly, it is clear that Norway does not count with a systematic and accessible way to ensure that lessons are effectively and fully learned and shared. This limitation affects multiple aspects of the support. It means that grant managers, and grantees, may not be aware of important and relevant information. In turn, this can also mean that interventions are less effective and efficient than they could be or that strategic goals are not fully met because critical information was not effectively learned and shared.



6

Recommendations





Recommendation 1: Further Develop and Utilize the Sahel Monitoring Tool - The MFA should revise and expand the functionality of the Sahel monitoring tool and extend its use to include all relevant MFA departments, Norad, and relevant embassies. This tool must continue to track project alignment with the strategy and should also be enhanced to monitor progress in the Sahel region while enabling the compilation of historical data and recording of key lessons learned. In addition, the tool could also aim to make links to important thematic policy documents. It should be applied to all funded projects by the MFA, Norad, and embassies.

Recommendation 2: Comprehensive Guidelines for Cross-Cutting Issues, Conflict Sensitivity, and Risk Assessment - Through the MFA, the Norwegian government should establish clear guidelines encompassing cross-cutting issues (e.g., gender, climate change, anti-corruption, human rights), conflict sensitivity, and risk assessments. These guidelines should apply to all funded projects by the MFA, Norad, and embassies. Partner organisations will be responsible for adhering to these guidelines and reporting accordingly. Ensure that cross-cutting issues, conflict sensitivity, and risks are consistently and comprehensively addressed in all funded projects to promote a more nuanced consideration of these issues and adequate, timely, and consistent response or adaptation where needed.

Recommendation 3: Strengthen Embassy Engagement and Knowledge Sharing - The embassy in Mali should take the lead in convening regular meetings among partners implementing projects on the ground. Norad and the MFA should have the option to and be encouraged to participate in these meetings to increase their understanding of ongoing initiatives in the Sahel. The embassy should also consider establishing a closed platform for continuous engagement, such as a shared team group, which will facilitate knowledge sharing and mutual support. These engagements will help strengthen collaboration and contextual knowledge among relevant Norwegian staff and partner organisations, enabling the early identification of collective challenges and relevant responses.

Recommendation 4: Promote Nexus-Based Projects and Build on Prior Recommendations - Utilise the improved coordination and information sharing to identify and promote a nexus approach at the portfolio level. Nexus programming integrates various sectors (e.g., humanitarian, development, and peacebuilding) to address complex challenges. The foundational recommendations guiding this approach include (Recommendation 1), (Recommendation 2), and (Recommendation 3). Emphasise the importance of linking interventions across sectors for holistic and integrated outcomes.

Recommendation 5: Partners - Conduct regular organisational assessments of established partners to verify that their ability to deliver (in specific contexts) has not been compromised. Additionally, consistently review the pool of partners to confirm that the agencies receiving support are aligned with Norwegian objectives. When necessary, incorporate new partners with specialised competencies that hold value for Norway.

Recommendation 6: Incorporate Lessons Learned - Ensure that all discussions, platforms, and reporting on funded projects have a clear agenda item or reporting section focused on lessons learned. This section should critically highlight what emerged from the learning process and actions taken based on the lessons learned. Make direct links to relevant earlier recommendations, specifically those pertaining to (Recommendation 1) and (Recommendation 2). This approach will foster continuous improvement and adaptation across all interventions. Additionally, develop guidance that details what can be expected from lessons learned and highlights the expectation that learning and adaptation emerging from learning are critical. This will promote the fostering of systematic learning organisations at the implementer level.





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Other documents consulted:

The team also consulted: internal and external communications from the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Norad and partners, concept notes, grants application forms, audit reports, financial agreements, the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs appropriation letters, work plans from the Embassies and notes from project visits.





List of annexes

Annex 1: Terms of reference

Annex 2: List of interviewees

Annex 3: Evaluation matrix and rubrics

Annex 4: Data collection instruments

Annex 5: Survey response overview

Annex 6: Case studies

Appendix 3 – 6 can be found as a separate document together with the report at norad.no/evaluation.





Annex 1

Terms of References

Evaluation of Norwegian aid engagement in the Sahel

Background

These terms of references explain how the Department for Evaluation will evaluate Norway's engagement related to official development assistance (ODA) in the Sahel. The purpose of the evaluation is to provide input on how Norway can adapt its engagement in a fragile and unstable context, such as the Sahel. The evaluation is part of a series of evaluations of Norwegian efforts in countries in fragile situations. So far, evaluations have been carried out of Norway's engagement in South Sudan in the period 2011–2018 and Somalia in the period 2012–2018. Both individually and collectively, these evaluations can provide useful input to Norway's engagement in fragile contexts.

Context

The geographic limits of the Sahel have been drawn in different ways. The Central Sahel refers to Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger. The Chad lake basin area refers to Cameroon, Chad, Niger and north-eastern Nigeria,

while the Sahel G5 used to refer to Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania and Niger. However, Mali has withdrawn from the G5 countries. There are also ongoing debates on the geographical framing of the response in the area and some have argued that the Sahel should not be separated from Western Africa. In these terms of references, the Sahel refers to Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania and Niger, as this is how Norway has framed its engagement in its Sahel strategy.

These countries have in common that they are among the most fragile and poorest in the world. Niger ranges number 189 out of 189 on the UNDP Human Development Index in 2021. Mali is ranked number 184. Burkina Faso, Chad and Mali were all part of the Norwegian Refugee Council's list of the world's most neglected displacement crises for 2021.¹ The Sahel countries face several shared transnational challenges. The countries are vulnerable to the adverse effects of climate change and cross-border security threats.

¹ NRC, 2022: The world's most neglected displacement crises in 2021.





According to the Global Report on Food Crises 2022², conflict and insecurity were the main drivers of acute food insecurity in the region in 2021 (GRFC 2022: 50). This is especially visible in the two main regional crises in the Lake Chad Basin and Liptako-Gourma (Central Sahel) areas, with competition over resources, climatic changes, demographic pressure, high levels of poverty, and violence reinforcing each other. The two crises have triggered large-scale internal and cross-border population displacement and severe disruption to livelihoods in 2021, particularly regarding agriculture, pastoralism, markets, and trade. These crises are the origin of most population displacements in West Africa and the Sahel. As of December 2021, around 3 million IDPs and 270 000 refugees and asylum seekers were registered across the region (GRFC 2022: 50). Coup d'états in Mali (2020 and 2021) and Burkina Faso (2022) further complicate the picture and make collaboration with these governments challenging. The security situation also makes development cooperation challenging.

The surge in forcibly displacement fuelled by instability and insecurity has resulted in increasing protection risks and needs. Against this background, local and international actors are to various degrees promoting conflict-sensitive integrated approaches to overcome the operational, organisational and financial

² Global Report on Food Crises: <https://docs.wfp.org/api/documents/WFP-0000138913/download/?ga=2.142663857.566271014.1652441255-443062028.1641212448>

differences between humanitarian, development and peace efforts – the so-called “triple nexus” or HDP nexus.

Norway in the Sahel

Norway has been engaged in the Sahel since the 1970s with both humanitarian and development assistance. Since the late 1980s Norwegian engagement in the Sahel was mainly in Mali, and the country continues to receive more than 50% of the Norwegian aid to the region. Mali has been a so-called partner country for Norwegian development cooperation since 2013.³ In 2016, Niger was also added to the list of partner countries. One year later, in 2017, the Norwegian embassy in Bamako, Mali, was established. The embassy is responsible for following up Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania and Niger. Since 2018, Norway has had a dedicated Sahel strategy and is currently implementing its second one (2021-2025), contributing with funds for development, humanitarian aid and stabilisation. The strategy is covering the totality of Norwegian engagement in the region, including humanitarian and development assistance, security, and peace efforts. Norway's strategy for efforts in the

³ Since 2013, Norway has had a list of focus countries for Norwegian development cooperation. The list was last updated in 2018 and now contains 16 countries in two categories (now called partner countries). One for partners for long-term development cooperation, and one for partners with a need for stabilisation and conflict prevention. The updated list can be found on the following link: Partnerland i norsk utviklingspolitikk - regjeringen.no

Sahel region underscores the importance of achieving better interaction between humanitarian efforts, the long-term development assistance and peacebuilding.

In addition to the Sahel strategy, the Norwegian engagement in the Sahel is guided by a range of policies and strategies, both at an overall development policy level, and more specifically with country strategies for Mali⁴ and Niger⁵. While the Sahel strategy covers all the five countries, with a few exceptions, only Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso receive direct aid from Norway. Even though there are several dedicated geographic Norwegian strategies for the region, Norwegian aid has the last years had a more thematic focus. The engagement is therefore also increasingly guided by thematic strategies⁶. In the last years for example, more than half of Norwegian aid is channelled through multilateral organisations either as core contributions or earmarked funding.

Some numbers

Total aid disbursed to the five Sahel countries in the period 1980-2021 is about NOK 5,9 billion. For the period 2016-2021 the total is about NOK 2,5 billion. These numbers exclude Norwegian core support through multilateral organisations to the Sahel

⁴ MFA: Partner country strategy Mali: [partner_mali.pdf \(regjeringen.no\)](#)
⁵ MFA: Partner country strategy Niger: [partner_niger.pdf \(regjeringen.no\)](#)
⁶ For example, a new strategy for food security in the Norwegian development policy is planned to be finalised by the end of 2022.





countries. About 53% (NOK 1,3 billion) of the total support to the Sahel between 2016-2021 is disbursed to Mali.

The Sahel status report 2018-2019 from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (2020) claims that Norwegian civil society organisations are behind a significant part of Norway's effort in the reporting period, not least at the community level and in sectors such as education, food security and climate.⁷ This is also supported by the Norwegian aid statistics. Volume-wise, Norwegian NGOs have consistently been the most significant channel for Norwegian development aid to the Sahel receiving 53% of the total support in the period 2016-2021. Norwegian NGOs and multilateral institutions together have channelled about 82% of all funds to the Sahel in the same period.

The main sectors supported in the period 2016-2021 are 1) education, 2) government and civil society, 3) emergency response, and 4) multisector and other. However, this is at a very aggregated level and hides a more nuanced picture of funding allocations per sector. For example, the relative weight of Norwegian food security related aid will be more significant if we disaggregate the numbers in the "multisector and other" and "emergency response" sector codes.

⁷ MFA Sahel status report, 2020: p. 3

The evaluation

The evaluation of Norway's engagement in the Sahel will assess different components of the support. The main objectives are

- Evaluation Objective 1: To assess whether the organisational set-up, strategic planning, partner selection and overall management of Norwegian aid to Sahel is enabling effective assistance to the region.
- Evaluation Objective 2: To assess the effects of Norway's aid cooperation to improve food security in Mali.
- Evaluation Objective 3: To provide information on the extent to which Norway harness knowledge and experience to adjust the strategic direction of its engagement in the Sahel.

Purpose and use of the evaluation

The purpose of the evaluation is learning and accountability through critical discussion of the organisation, coordination, and management of the Norwegian engagement in the Sahel, and through the provision of evidence of results of the Norwegian support to improve food security in Mali. The evaluation may be used to adapt the current Sahel strategy as the strategy is presented as a living

document to be subject to adjustments and refinement when required.

Learning can be achieved through; a) discussing the institutional set-up of and the regional aspect of the support; b) through a critical analysis of how Norway selects partners and how this can be optimised to be able to work in an unstable and unpredictable context, and c) documenting results of Norwegian aid in one country through one specific sector.

Accountability can be achieved by providing information to key stakeholders (and the public) who can use this information to hold other actors accountable. It is important to stress that the Department for Evaluation can only provide information for others to use.

Potential users of the evaluation include decision makers, and those involved in grant management and partner dialogue of the support to the Sahel. This includes sections in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Norad, and the Norwegian Embassy in Bamako. Other users may be organisations implementing projects in the Sahel, especially related to different dimension around food security.





Scope of the evaluation

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs has previously commissioned a review of the Sahel strategy (2018-2020) focusing on peace and reconciliation, and security and political stability.

These terms of references focus exclusively on official development assistance funded through the budget of the Norwegian Foreign Affairs (*budsjettområde 03 Internasjonal bistand*), both long-term development efforts and humanitarian assistance. Even though the evaluation focuses on the aid engagement, it will also cover other policy areas, to the extent that these affect the operationalisation, implementation and effects of Norwegian development policy affecting the Sahel.

For Evaluation Objective 1, the geographic scope is regional and includes all the countries covered by the Norwegian Sahel strategy. For the second objective, the geographic scope is limited to Mali.

The thematic scope for Evaluation Objective 2 is limited to support to food security, herein defined in an encompassing way including all four dimensions (availability, access, utilisation and stability) covered in the definition commonly employed by UN agencies⁸. Both development and humanitarian food security

⁸ FAO, IFAD, UNICEF, WFP and WHO (2021). The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World 2021. FAO.

related aid are included. The choice of thematic focus is first and foremost based on interest expressed in stakeholder conversations, the emphasis of food security in the various strategies and the fact that it will also be an area where substantial needs will exist and likely a high priority for Norway in the years to come. The current government platform⁹ has food security as one of its top priorities. Together with climate smart agriculture, this is also one of the priorities in the country strategies for Mali and Niger. The priority of food security support is also reflected in Norway's Revised National Budget for 2022 and in the allocation letter (*tildelingsskrivet*) to the embassy in Bamako for 2022.

The overall evaluation period covers the years 2016-2022. For 2022, statistics will not be available until the second quarter of 2023. However, other guiding documents and reports will be available for 2022. In the case of Evaluation Objective 2, the team will propose a time period that will allow for assessing the effects of the support (see Approach and methodology section below).

The scope of this evaluation is also defined considering synergies with other planned or ongoing evaluations as per the 2022-2024 Evaluation Programme of the Department for Evaluation¹⁰, including the evaluation of the sustainability of

⁹ Government platform: [hurdalsplattformen.pdf \(regjeringen.no\)](https://www.regjeringen.no)

¹⁰ Evaluation programme 2022–2024 ([norad.no](https://www.norad.no))

Norwegian food security aid and the evaluation of the interaction between humanitarian aid, development cooperation and peace efforts. Both these evaluations are planned to start in the second half of 2022. In addition, the section for food in Norad is currently conducting a midterm review of four agricultural research-for-development projects in Mali and Niger. The report is planned to be finalised by the end of 2022 and may be used when responding to evaluation objective two if deemed relevant.

Evaluation questions

1. Organisational set-up, strategic planning, partner selection and management of Norwegian aid to the Sahel:
 - a. To what extent does the organisational and management set-up and strategic planning enable optimal use of all available workforce and expertise to facilitate efficient and effective Norwegian assistance to Sahel?
 - b. To what extent is Norwegian assistance to the Sahel relevant, and shows flexibility and ability to adapt to the continuously changing contexts and challenges in a conflict-sensitive manner? How does the organisational and management set-up affect flexibility and adaptability, if at all?





- c. To what extent is the Norwegian engagement coordinated, both internally and externally?
- d. To what extent do the different Norwegian strategies affecting the Sahel engagement facilitate a coherent and conflict-sensitive approach? To what extent are these strategies helpful for prioritising the support?
- e. What is the rationale behind the choice of partners? What assessments are done when selecting partners by Norway? (Including in relation to conflict sensitivity and coordinating with other donors in selecting partners)

2. Effects

- a. To what extent (and eventually how) has Norwegian development assistance contributed to improve food security in Mali?
- b. Has Norwegian development assistance to food security in Mali had any unintended effects, positive or negative?
- c. To what extent is the partner set-up appropriate in contributing to improve food security in Mali?

3. Learning

- a. To what extent does Norway ensure that lessons and experiences gained from its ongoing operations, from partners and research evidence are used for learning, and to adjust the strategic direction of Norwegian assistance?

Organisation of the evaluation

The evaluation will be managed by the Department for Evaluation.

The evaluation will be conducted through one tender with two distinctive deliverables, each of them addressing specific sets of evaluation questions and with slightly divergent scopes as described above:

1. An evaluation of the organisation, strategic planning, and management of Norwegian development assistance to the Sahel. (Evaluation Objectives 1 and 3, corresponding with evaluation questions 1a – 1-e and 3).
2. An evaluation of the effects of Norwegian development assistance to improve food security in Mali. (Evaluation Objectives 2 and 3, corresponding with evaluation questions 2a, 2b and 3).

The evaluation team will report to the Department for Evaluation through the team leader. The team leader shall be in charge of all deliveries and will report to the Department of Evaluation on the team's progress, including any problems that may jeopardise the assignment. The Department for Evaluation and the team shall emphasise transparent and open communication with the stakeholders. Regular contact between the Department for Evaluation, team and stakeholders will assist in discussing any arising issues and ensuring a participatory process. All decisions concerning the interpretation of this Terms of Reference, and all deliverables are subject to approval by the Department for Evaluation.

The team should consult widely with stakeholders pertinent to the assignment. In some evaluations, the Department for Evaluation participates in parts of the field visits to better understand the context of the evaluation. This may also be discussed for this evaluation. Stakeholders will be asked to comment on the draft inception report and the draft final report. In addition, experts or other relevant parties may be invited to comment on reports or specific issues during the process. The evaluation team shall take note of all comments received from stakeholders. Where there are significant divergences of views between the evaluation team and stakeholders, this shall be reflected in the final report. Quality assurance shall be provided by the institution delivering the consultancy services prior to submission of all deliverables. Access to archives





and statistics will be facilitated by the Department for Evaluation and stakeholders. The team is responsible for all data collection, including archival search.

The Department for Evaluation will develop recommendations on how to improve future Norwegian development assistance to the Sahel building on the two deliverables. The Department for Evaluation may also develop an overall summary of the two deliverables for communication purposes.

The security situation may affect the evaluation in terms of timing of field visits, access to people and areas in Mali, and security and safety of evaluation informants and evaluation team members. This requires flexibility and will have to be carefully considered during the evaluation.

Approach and methodology

The evaluation team will propose an outline of a methodological approach that optimises the possibility of producing evidence-based assessments. All parts of the evaluation shall adhere to recognised evaluation principles and the OECD Development Assistance Committee's quality standards for development evaluation, as well as relevant guidelines from the Department for Evaluation¹¹.

¹¹ See Evaluation guidelines (norad.no)

The methodological approach should:

1. Rely on a cross-section of data sources and using mixed methods of both quantitative and qualitative methods to ensure triangulation of information through a variety of means.
2. Be synthesised in an evaluation matrix, which should be used as the key organising tool for the evaluation.

The evaluation shall include the following components:

1. Evaluation of the organisation, strategic planning, and management of Norwegian development assistance to the Sahel. (Evaluation objectives 1 and 3):

- The evaluation team will propose an approach that responds to the purpose and objectives and ability to respond to the evaluation questions. It is expected to carry out a systematic review of relevant documents. This includes archival searches in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the embassy in Bamako and in Norad. The consultants are expected to gather information through key informant interviews and other primary data collection methods as necessary.
- Data collection in Oslo and Bamako will be necessary.

2. Evaluation of the effects of Norwegian development assistance to improve food security in Mali. (Evaluation objectives 2 and 3):

- The evaluation team will in its proposal suggest an approach for how to best assess the effects of the Norwegian support to food security in Mali. It is strongly recommended for the team to conduct an evaluability study early in the process to define the exact scope, including the optimal time horizon to enable this type of evaluation.
- The evaluation will follow a rigorous approach to measure causality, by resorting to quasi-experimental and/or theory-based approaches (e.g. process tracing in combination with Bayesian updating or a method with similar rigour).
- For this component, the evaluation team might want to correlate data on Norwegian development aid with external data sources such as the Famine and Early Warning Systems Network, the World Bank or the OECD.
- Data collection in Mali will be necessary.

3. Communication plan: The consultants will propose a plan for how the evaluation findings shall be disseminated to all those involved in the evaluation at country/regional level.





Ethical considerations

The evaluation process itself should be conflict sensitive and be guided by an overarching analysis of risks, including ethical risks. The evaluation shall be undertaken with integrity and honesty and ensure inclusiveness of views. The rights, dignity, and welfare of participants in the evaluation should be protected. The evaluation team should seek informed consent and safeguard the anonymity and confidentiality of individual informants. Ethical considerations and accompanying safeguards shall be documented throughout the evaluation processes. Moreover, an introductory statement to the expected deliverables shall explain what measures were or were not taken to abide by ethical principles.

Evaluation deliverables

The deliverables consist of the following outputs:

- Inception report describing the approach of maximum 15 000 words (excluding figures, graphs and annexes). The inception report needs to be approved by the Department for Evaluation before proceeding further.
- Debrief country/regional level after data collection.
- Draft report evaluation objective 1. After circulation to the stakeholders, the Department for Evaluation will provide feedback.

- Draft report evaluation objective 2. After circulation to the stakeholders, the Department for Evaluation will provide feedback.
- Workshop(s) on draft findings and conclusions facilitated by the Department for Evaluation.
- Final report evaluation objective 1 not exceeding 15,000 words (approx. 30 pages) excluding summary and annexes.
- Final report evaluation objective 2 not exceeding 15,000 words (approx. 30 pages) excluding summary and annexes.
- Datasets generated and used in the evaluation shall be submitted in .csv or another Excel compatible format. Similarly, if computer assisted qualitative data analysis is conducted, the data files are to be submitted together with the draft analysis report.
- Oral presentation at a seminar in Oslo.
- Evaluation brief not exceeding 4 pages.

All reports shall be prepared in accordance with the Department for Evaluation's guidelines¹² and shall be submitted in electronic form in accordance with the progress plan specified in the tender document or later revisions. The Department for Evaluation retains the sole rights with respect to distribution, dissemination and publication of the deliverables.

¹² <https://www.norad.no/en/front/evaluation/about-evaluation-department/evaluation-guidelines/>.





Annex 2

List of interviewees

Position	Organisation	Gender	Date
Senior advisor, Section for Central Europe and the EEA Norway Grants	MFA	Female	17/02/2023
Senior advisor, Section for Education	Norad	Female	10/03/2023
Advisor, Section for Education	Norad	Female	10/03/2023
Senior Advisor, Section for Global Security	MFA	Male	10/03/2023
Senior Advisor, Section for Education, Norad focal point for Mali and Niger	Norad	Male	29/03/2023
Senior advisor, Section for Gender Equality	Norad	Female	16/03/2023
Senior Advisor, Section for Food	Norad	Female	16/03/2023
Assistant Director/Head of Section, Section for Civil Society	Norad	Female	25/03/2023
Senior advisor, Section for Civil Society	Norad	Female	25/03/2023
Senior advisor, Section for the Horn of Africa and West Africa	MFA	Female	13/04/2023
Foreign Service Trainee, Section for the Horn of Africa and West Africa	MFA	Female	13/04/2023
Special Envoy for the Sahel	MFA	Male	10/02/2023
Department Director, Section for the Horn of Africa and West Africa	MFA	Female	14/02/2023
Senior Advisor	MFA	Female	14/02/2023
Researcher from NUPI	NUPI	Male	24/02/2023





Position	Organisation	Gender	Date
Researcher at PRIO	PRIO	Male	15/02/2023
Senior Advisor, Section for Humanitarian Affairs	MFA	Female	10/02/2023
Policy Director, Section for Humanitarian Affairs	MFA	Female	10/02/2023
Senior Advisor, Section for Peace and Reconciliation	MFA	Female	10/02/2023
Second Secretary	Royal Norwegian Embassy Bamako	Female	27/02/2023
Project Manager	Royal Norwegian Embassy Bamako	Male	27/02/2023
Project Manager	Royal Norwegian Embassy Bamako	Female	27/02/2023
Ambassador Designated to Mali	Royal Norwegian Embassy Bamako	Female	01/03/2023
Country Director	Norwegian Church Aid	Female	01/03/2023
Project Manager	Royal Danish Embassy Bamako	Male	02/03/2023
Head of Mission	Royal Danish Embassy Bamako	Female	02/03/2023
Head of Partnership	World Food Programme	Female	01/03/2023
Partnerships Officer	World Food Programme	Female	01/03/2023
Partnerships Officer	World Food Programme	Male	01/03/2023
Desk Officer	Norad	Male	19/04/2023



Department for Evaluation