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Scaling up RBA collaboration:
The One Sahel Initiative

Storyline

The Sahel is region of great and urgent challenges. The United Nations Integrated Strategy for the Sahel (UNISS) defines the region as comprising 10 countries: Senegal, The Gambia, Mauritania, Guinea, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, Chad, Cameroon and Nigeria. As a result of climate change, desertification, drought and floods, the dry zone has spread a further 200 km southward over the past 30 years. This has disrupted farm output and altered transhumance routes, creating conflicts. Food insecurity affects 41 million people. The number of internally displaced persons has soared, especially in Burkina Faso.

Yet it is also a region of opportunity. The Sahel has the world's youngest population: 65 per cent are under 25. By 2050, the region will be home to 500 million people. This dynamic youthful workforce can transform agriculture if they are given cutting-edge technologies and climate-resilient infrastructure and taught innovative agribusiness practices.

The Rome-based agencies (RBAs) have come up with a joint response: The One Sahel Initiative. It is a long-term strategy for programming investments and climate finance across the region to leverage comparative advantages, strengthen synergies and maximize impact. The initiative comprises: (i) the Joint Programme for the Sahel in Response to the Challenges of COVID-19, Conflict and Climate Change (SD3C), the largest RBA initiative, totalling US$181 million; (ii) the Africa Integrated Climate Risk Management Programme (AICRM) – US$82 million; (iii) the Inclusive Green Financing Initiative (IGREENFIN) – EUR 104 million; and (iv) the Great Green Wall Climate Change Adaptation Regional Support Project – EUR 8.9 million.

Why do we need a joint regional approach? Regional operations can provide benefits that single-country projects cannot deliver. Improving the sustainability of farming across a vast semi-arid region of unpoliced frontiers spanning six countries[1] is a huge challenge. To be effective in a region across which people and animals move freely, the RBAs must combine forces and work together within the Humanitarian, Development and Peace (HDP) nexus.

We have learned how to make this approach deliver great value. The pioneering SD3C programme has taught us how to work together. Despite the fragile context, at midterm, it has reached 50,000 rural households (68 per cent of the target), albeit not always in a coordinated manner. The programme's objectives and targets remain relevant: the challenge for the second phase, spanning the next three years, is to achieve collaboration at scale. To deliver the other One Sahel operations, now in start-up phase, we will need to revise how activities will be implemented. One solution would be for FAO and WFP to focus on extremely vulnerable groups through emergency food aid and safety nets, while IFAD continues to target rural farmers and herders through projects to improve productivity, access to markets and resilience. After the withdrawal of Burkina Faso, Niger and Mali from the Group of Five for the Sahel (G5 Sahel), we are in the process of identifying a new regional entity that can coordinate the work.

We have vastly improved collaboration and SD3C has laid the foundations for hugely increased impact via the One Sahel Initiative. We have learned to work together at scale, blending loan resources with grants. However, we need to hire up front, move more effectively and step up resource mobilization efforts. By integrating these lessons and staying flexible, we can make One Sahel much more than the sum of its parts and respond to hunger and climate disruption and the needs of a fast-growing, young population.

[1] The countries of the Group of Five for the Sahel (G5) and Senegal.

1. Regional context

The geopolitical region of the Sahel, as defined by the UNISS, covers 10 countries (Senegal, The Gambia, Mauritania, Guinea, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, Chad, Cameroon and Nigeria). Its population is projected to reach over 500 million by 2050. The region is home to the youngest population in the world, with 65 per cent of its inhabitants under 25 years old. This offers great opportunities for mainstreaming a dynamic youthful workforce into agriculture using digital tools, cutting-edge technologies and innovative agri-business practices.

The region also faces many challenges. Climate change threatens to further degrade land, vegetation, water resources and food systems through increased incidence of drought, desertification and floods and a projected shortening of the rainy season. The Sahel ecological zone has shifted from 50 to 200 kilometres southward over the last three decades, resulting in biodiversity and arable and pasture land losses. Climate vulnerability remains high and is linked to low readiness to address and adapt to climate change. Based on data from the Notre Dame Global Adaptation Index (ND-GAIN), the countries of G5 Sahel and Senegal are in the "red" zone of the climate vulnerability and readiness matrix.

Disputes between farmers and herders over natural resources have become more frequent as the effects of climate change increasingly interfere with their traditional practices, which, together with increasing conflicts, has forced herders to modify their transhumant routes, often without the prior consent of farming communities. Excluding Mauritania, there are nearly 3.1 million internally displaced persons (IDPs) in the Sahel because of conflicts and violence. This number is highest in Burkina Faso, with 2.0 million internally displaced persons, accounting for 65 per cent of the IDP population in the Sahel. Between 2021 and 2023, the number of internally displaced persons increased by 31 per cent in Burkina Faso, 7 per cent in Mali, 50 per cent in Niger, and 6 per cent in Chad. Between 2020 and 2022, an estimated 41.5 million people were experiencing moderate or severe food insecurity in the Sahel:[2] 12.6 million in Burkina Faso, 2.5 million in Mauritania, 8.4 million in Senegal and 18.0 million in Niger.

In 2022, Mali withdrew from G5 Sahel and was followed in 2023 by Burkina Faso and Niger. With only Chad and Mauritania remaining members, there is uncertainty about the future of the regional organization.

2. The One Sahel Initiative

The One Sahel Initiative is conceived as a long-term vehicle for programming RBA investments and aggregating climate funding at regional level with a view to achieving greater synergy and enhanced impact. It is currently comprises SD3C, AICRM, IGREENFIN and Great Green Wall Climate Change Adaptation Regional Support Project.[3] The SD3C programme has just completed its midterm review whereas the others are at the start-up stage.

The **Joint Programme for the Sahel in Response to the Challenges of COVID-19, Conflict and Climate Change (SD3C)** has been under implementation for about two years. The programme has a total value of US$181.4 million and its purpose is to improve the resilience and economic opportunities of 123,000 rural households in the cross-border areas of Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, Niger and Senegal. It is the first sizeable RBA collaboration and also IFAD's first regional lending operation (RLO). SD3C was designed in 2020 in response to a request from G5 Sahel and Senegal and was launched in June 2021. It is being implemented in two phases over six years and includes a midterm review/restructuring exercise that is about to be concluded. Until 30 June 2024, regional coordination responsibilities are being led by the G5 Sahel Secretariat, with regional producers' organizations (acting as essential implementation partners[4] particularly in insecure areas and for capacity-building). The programme received cofinancing from the Netherlands (US$13.2 million), Italy (US$1.9 million) and Ireland (US$0.5 million). A Multi-Donor Funding Facility (MDFF) was created in March 2024 to mobilize resources for scaling up results and impact.

[2] Based on the geographical definition of G5 Sahel + Senegal in the context of SD3C programme. The estimate excludes Chad and Mali due to unavailable data.
[3] In this context, the SD3C and AICRM programmes also represent the two main axes of collaboration in the Sahel – within the IFAD-WFP action plan, launched in 2024 – aimed at tackling hunger and poverty in fragile contexts, enhancing RBA partnership and focusing on combined efforts from 2024–2027 for impactful interventions.
[4] Réseau des Organisations Paysannes et Producteurs Agricoles de l'Afrique de l'Ouest (ROPPA), Réseau Billital Maroobè (RBM) and Association pour la Promotion de l'Elevage au Sahel et en Savane (APESS).

The **Africa Integrated Climate Risk Management Programme (AICRM**), with a total budget of US$82 million, is funded by the Green Climate Fund (GCF). It covers seven countries: Burkina Faso, Chad, The Gambia, Mali, Mauritania, Niger and Senegal. The objective of the programme is to build, strengthen and scale up the resilience and adaptive capacity of 817,922 smallholder farmers and rural communities, and to mitigate climate change using an integrated climate risk management approach. This approach combines climate risk preparedness with climate risk reduction and risk transfer. The programme was officially launched at the regional level in March 2023 and will last for six years. It is being implemented through national governments in partnership with WFP, the African Development Bank and the African Risk Capacity Group. IFAD has received the first AICRM-related disbursement from GCF, and a regional start-up workshop was held on 6 and 7 March 2024 in Banjul.

The **Inclusive Green Financing Initiative (IGREENFIN)** has a budget of EUR 104 million and is also funded by the GCF. It covers five countries: Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Mali and Senegal. The objective of IGREENFIN is to increase the resilience of 378,600 smallholder farmers to adverse impacts of climate change by removing recurrent barriers to accessing green financial and non-financial services. The focus will be on building their resilience by better adapting their agricultural activities to current and future climate risks through, inter alia, clean energy and more efficient water resource management practices. The programme will be implemented through national governments in partnership with local national agricultural banks and will target farmers' organizations, women's and young people's organizations, cooperatives and micro, small and medium-sized enterprises. The Funded Activity Agreement was signed between the GCF and IFAD on 1 April 2022. It was amended on 18 January 2024 and became effective on 30 January 2024, paving the way for start-up.

The **Great Green Wall (GGW) Climate Change Adaptation Regional Support Project** received Global Environment Facility (GEF) endorsement in December 2023 for financing of EUR 8.9 million. It will be rolled out hand-in-hand with the GCF-funded Regional Support Programme of IGREEFIN-1 within the framework of the GEF-GCF Long-Term Vision. It seeks to improve access to best practices, foster innovation and digital transformation, and facilitate cross-learning across GGW countries for enhanced sustainability and resilience to climate change impacts.

3. A regional approach to strengthening resilience

Regional operations have been financed by other international financial institutions (IFIs) and United Nations agencies for over a decade and are seen as a powerful tool that can provide benefits that single-country projects cannot deliver. As a case in point, the RBAs' approach to strengthening resilience in the Sahel addresses the regional nature of the key issues, the drivers of fragility and chronic under-investment in the cross-border areas.

The approach is based on the Humanitarian, Development and Peace nexus: it seeks to address poverty and hunger, while simultaneously promoting environmentally sustainable and climate-resilient livelihoods and underpinning these actions with activities designed to promote economic empowerment and human development. This is the fruit of a long-term vision. It is designed to build the capacity of community organizations that sustain the livelihoods and food security of smallholder producers. Flexibility is paramount to rapid and adapted interventions, as is the determination to remain engaged (when security allows) during all phases of evolving conflict situations, to safeguard the livelihoods of the most vulnerable groups. Collaboration is key to capitalizing on the comparative advantage of each institution related to this nexus.

The SD3C programme shows how such collaboration can work to deliver better results for populations at risk. WFP is in charge of rehabilitating degraded lands, FAO is in charge of providing start-up kits to agricultural and pastoral households and extension advice about making best use of the newly reclaimed land, and IFAD is responsible for supervision and infrastructure-related interventions to facilitate access to market information and markets. Collaboration with regional pastoralist organizations promotes dialogue among stakeholders and conflict prevention paves the way for new transhumant routes and new opportunities for herders to produce milk, hides, meat and organic fertilizer that can be sold to farmers to help them increase their yields – ensuring both farmers and herders benefit from enhanced symbiosis.

G5 Sahel, a regional body sponsored by member states, has further strengthened the approach as it is in charge of policy dialogue, coordination and management, all integrated through the coordination mechanism of the regional body.

4. Operational progress of SD3C at the midterm

Overall, about 50,000 households have benefited from the SD3C programme so far. This corresponds to 68 per cent of the phase I target of 73,000 households.

Financial performance is strongest in Mali with EUR 16.1 million disbursed since the beginning of the programme, corresponding to approximately 62 per cent of aggregate disbursements so far. It is followed by Chad (EUR 3.7 million), Burkina Faso (EUR 2.8 million), Senegal (EUR 2.5 million) and Niger (EUR 0.8 million).

At the national level, achievements include: (i) the development of 6,500 hectares of agricultural and pastoral land; (ii) the establishment of 339 Agropastoral Field Schools, 300 self-help groups (Dimitra clubs) and 24 community savings and credit associations; (iii) the distribution of 19,000 agro-sylvo-pastoral and fish farming kits; (iv) the training 40,000 smallholders in various skills (good farming practices, entrepreneurship, conflict management, nutrition); and (v) the rehabilitation or construction of 88 pieces of infrastructure (wells, pastoral ponds, transhumance corridors, vaccination pens, etc.).

At regional level, the regional coordination unit (G5 Sahel Secretariat), in partnership with regional farmer/pastoralist organizations, have organized 18 events on such themes as transhumance, agroecological transition, local milk value chains, farmer-herder conflicts, inter-professional conflicts, regional economic integration, and women's and youth entrepreneurship in cross-border areas.

The midterm review found the technical components generally relevant in terms of addressing climate and conflict. However, the activities related to COVID-19 will be recast within a wider emergency preparedness context and will benefit from: (i) operational linkages to AICRM risk mitigation interventions through the One Sahel Initiative; and (ii) additional operational support for social safety nets, humanitarian assistance and food aid channelled to WFP and FAO through the MDFF. This will be budgeted for under the new SD3C components, which have been added following the midterm review/restructuring exercise.

The operational component will feature modified implementation arrangements that will no longer rely on unilateral trust fund (UTF) agreements but on new modalities under the MDFF, sub-teams physically closer to targeted areas, greater efficiencies in contracting service providers, and a revamped, active role for rural communities and local government units at different levels as part of a specific territorial development approach. The latter will feature increased attention to concentration areas, which will avoid spreading resources too thinly and increase the likelihood of significant and sustainable impact, and to cross-border infrastructure, a key requirement in regional development not always placed high enough on the list of investment priorities.

5. Challenges

Since start-up, the programme has encountered three main issues: (i) communication; (ii) technical and financial reporting; and (iii) resource mobilization.

Communication. Management of the programme's communication needed improvement from the very beginning because activities on the ground were not always presented as joint RBAs efforts with government resources allocated. In addition, limited communication between the FAO and WFP country offices and the host IFAD projects led to misunderstandings that delayed the start of activities. This issue was discussed by the teams and the three regional directors involved in the programme. A joint communication plan has been agreed on to reduce isolated actions.

Technical and financial reporting. FAO and WFP signed a partnership and service provision agreement with IFAD borrowing Member States. This UTF agreement was intended to guide implementation of programme activities and ensure consistency with approved workplans and budgets. The provisions of the agreement made the submission of financial reports challenging for borrowers. Furthermore, the auditors contracted by the borrowers were unable to access the necessary financial records during external annual audits due to the United Nations principle that IFAD should rely on the internal mechanisms of FAO and WFP for obtaining audit assurance. As a result, borrowers were not always able to comply with their fiduciary obligations, leading to potential defaults. Following recent discussions that reiterated the double status of IFAD as a United Nations agency and an international financial institution, FAO has agreed to a reporting format. In addition, it was agreed that unaudited interim financial reports would be submitted semi-annually, and certified financial reports annually. With regard to audit, alternatives were discussed to circumvent the need to have direct access to records, for example through reliance on certifications provided by FAO Senior Management.

Resource mobilization. While the communication and reporting challenges have been addressed, there continues to be a financing gap. The total programme cost is US$180 million, of which US$73 million was sourced from the Eleventh Replenishment of IFAD's Resources (IFAD11), leaving a gap of US$107 million to be filled, including parallel cofinancing of US$71 million from the GCF. This called for a joint effort to step up resource mobilization either through parallel or direct cofinancing or by leveraging respective networks. IFAD responded by bringing the GCF parallel cofinancing into effectiveness, and mobilizing US$18 million from IFAD12 resources, plus cofinancing from Netherlands (US$13.2 million), Italy (US$1.9 million) and Ireland (US$0.5 million). Based on the investment plans prepared at midterm for phase 2, the remaining gap is estimated to be US$78 million. Discussions have begun with respective Member States to commit a portion of IFAD13 resources to SD3C to further narrow the gap. IFAD has also conducted visits to Germany, France and Belgium to scout for cofinancing opportunities. In addition, IFAD has been engaging with the Sahel Alliance to position SD3C as a potential flagship initiative. It held a side event at COP28 that gave visibility to SD3C for the first time at an external meeting and created a Multi-Donor Funding Facility to allow for the mobilization of grant resources. IFAD, FAO and WFP jointly hosted a donors' dinner in Dakar on the sidelines of the SD3C midterm review.

6. Learning

The context is favourable for joint impact at scale. The emerging international dynamic around the HDP nexus presents an opportunity for the RBAs to renew commitment and scale up collaboration. The first phase of implementation suggests that the context in the Sahel is conducive for focused convergence and capitalizes on the complementarity of the three respective mandates.

A judicious blend of loans and grants underpin much needed hard investments with equally necessary soft investments in peace-building, capacity-building, policy dialogue, and forge operational linkages between farmer and pastoralist organizations and national governments and regional institutions.

The host project formula (the baseline IFAD projects hosting the SD3C) allows for quick wins upstream, fast start-ups and a range of cost-efficiencies. However challenges may arise downstream, for example in harmonizing the approaches and target groups of the host and the hosted projects.

Agility in recruitments could facilitate an early start of supplementary funded operations. The GCF allows for the funding of staff positions at the regional level to cover important coordination functions. However, hiring of staff has only been possible upon receipt of fees from the GCF, whereas major investments of staff time are critical early in the first project year, during initial disbursements. Therefore, under SD3C, these functions have had to be funded through ad hoc mechanisms such as secondment. The learning suggests considering the use of a "dummy budget line" for issuing vacancy announcements while awaiting receipt of the fees. The hiring of staff could also benefit from a parallel process for supplementary funded positions, which better leverages in-country mechanisms used by the United Nations Country Teams.

Providing incentives and sustaining demand for regional operations will be critical to the viability of regional initiatives. Other IFIs have created incentives for regional operations through a dedicated financing window – additional to performance-based allocation system resources – for countries to tackle cross-border and regional issues. This has eliminated the dilemma many countries face in choosing between regional and national priorities.

In 2018, IFAD Management proposed leveraging existing financial instruments and allocation mechanisms to allow the time needed to evaluate a separate allocation mechanism. The experience gained was to be analysed in conjunction with the review of the performance-based allocation system (PBAS) ahead of IFAD12. The case of SD3C as a pilot RLO does not provide enough experience to inform decisions for a financial mechanism. However, considering the financing gap and learning from the reticence of Member States to continue cropping their PBAS resources for SD3C, incentives could be created under IFAD13 by introducing a "regional operations factor" that would top up the PBAS allocations of participating Member States with a modest amount.

7. Way forward

The SD3C midterm review and restructuring exercise will be completed at the regional level by the end of June, and at the national level in all six countries before the end of the year.

All remaining One Sahel operations begin implementation this year. Work is ongoing to deepen understanding and promote points of convergence with a view to further increasing synergies among implementing partners. Initial analyses have focused on geographical, social and activity targeting, and the staffing of host projects.

A technical coordination committee will be set up in the coming months to further enhance RBA coordination.

The imminent recruitment of key priority staff will support the granular analysis needed to identify additional entry points for enhanced convergence of interventions, thus allowing the initiative to become ultimately greater than the sum of its parts. The initiative is thus embedded in a new regional approach to medium- and long-term investment, one that can accommodate short-term needs and prospects, as it is built on a permanent programmatic framework and platform for the Sahel that can grow and adapt to evolving conditions and opportunities.

In light of the withdrawal of Burkina Faso, Niger and Mali from G5 Sahel, a new regional entity in under selection to coordinate the work.

Annex I. Illustration of the One Sahel Initiative