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Sustainable development in the Sahel

Implementation of integrated, coherent and coordinated support for South Sudan and the Sahel region by the United Nations system

Report of the Secretary-General

I. Introduction

1. The present report has been prepared pursuant to Economic and Social Council decision 2020/232, in which the Council requested the Secretary-General to submit for its consideration a report under the sub-item entitled “African countries emerging from conflict” of the agenda item entitled “Coordination, programme and other questions” on the implementation of integrated, coherent and coordinated support to South Sudan by the United Nations system. Subsequently, in its decision 2020/231 on sustainable development in the Sahel, the Council requested the Secretary-General to report to it at its 2021 session on how the United Nations system was implementing integrated, coherent and coordinated support to achieve sustainable development in the Sahel region, within existing resources, under the sub-item entitled “Sustainable development in the Sahel” of the item entitled “Coordination, programme and other questions”.

II. South Sudan

A. Context

2. Since the signing of the Revitalized Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in South Sudan in 2018, considerable progress towards peace has been made, with a reduction in conflict-related violence throughout the country, although intercommunal violence has increased. A significant benchmark was achieved with the formation of the Revitalized Transitional Government of National Unity in March 2020. The Presidency, comprising the President, the First Vice-President and four Vice-



Presidents, was constituted on 22 February 2020. The appointment of governors for the 10 states of the country took several months to complete, and the appointment of deputy governors and commissioners was finalized subsequently. Nonetheless, the implementation of the peace process has been slow, and some pre-transitional tasks remain uncompleted, including the training and redeployment of a unified force. The reconstitution of the Transitional National Legislative Assembly and the appointment of the Council of States are also pending. Furthermore, the peace agreement stipulates that 35 per cent of posts in the executive were to be allocated to women, but only one of the governors appointed to date is a woman.

3. In 2020, the economic hardships affecting the country contributed to the slow implementation of the peace agreement. The economic recovery had started well in 2018 and continued throughout 2019. In 2020, the economy of South Sudan was initially projected to grow above 10 per cent, but recent estimates for the year point to an economic contraction of about 4–5 per cent. As the country is heavily dependent on natural resources (oil represents about 95 per cent of its exports), coronavirus disease (COVID-19) significantly slowed the economy owing to lockdown measures. Furthermore, as a result of the plummeting global oil demand, the low price of oil led to a large decrease in exports and national revenue. This led the Government to opt for monetization, causing considerable depreciation of the South Sudanese pound on the parallel market, from about 280 pounds per \$1 in March 2020 to about 600 pounds per \$1 in December 2020. As the indicative exchange rate set by the Bank of South Sudan was kept constant, the rising gap between the indicative and parallel market rates put pressure on the country's reserves, and in August 2020 the Bank of South Sudan ran out of foreign exchange reserves. As at April 2021, the macroeconomic situation remains challenging; for example, it is estimated that civil servants have not been paid for five months. The proposed resource envelope for the 2020/2021 budget indicated a fiscal deficit of more than 50 per cent of the \$1.3 billion budget, with unclear indication as to its funding. In addition, the national budget for 2020/21 has not yet been approved.

4. Government overdrafts from the Central Bank have also spurred inflation. In December 2020 alone, prices increased by 58 per cent. Inflation contributed to an estimated 1.6 million people sliding into vulnerability, in particular the urban poor, whose earnings are in local currency, but who face prices indexed to the United States dollar. Increased competition for resources because of economic hardship may well have contributed to the uptick in violence at the subnational level, in particular in the form of asset stripping and cattle raiding. Agriculture in South Sudan is a bifurcation between farmers and pastoralists. While farming, especially in remote parts of the country, is mainly pursued as a subsistence activity, cattle form the basis for trade and are the principal source of wealth within and across communities. The uneasy relations between farmers and pastoralists often result in serious tensions, which historically led to the creation of well-established and sophisticated customary systems of conflict management in most parts of the country. However, those systems have been substantially weakened by decades of armed conflict, displacement and economic stress.

5. Despite the country's fertile soil, South Sudan is a significant importer of food and there is limited integration into the global economy. Owing to decades of conflict, there is little infrastructure development. Roads are of poor quality, which limits access to markets. Access to electricity is also limited and unreliable. In April 2021, the Juba Electricity Distribution Company and Ezra Company started load-shedding.

6. With poor infrastructure, and the country being landlocked, trade is costlier than in other countries as it relies on underdeveloped road networks, which in addition are

often insecure and prone to armed ambushes. In April 2021, there was an upsurge of attacks on foreign truck drivers from Uganda and Kenya.

7. The combination of inadequate trade integration and meagre agricultural development have had a negative impact on the economy, with other natural shocks compounding the situation. Towards the end of 2020, the country suffered the worst flooding in 60 years, affecting 1.4 million people, and yet the financial requirements to implement the country's 2020 Humanitarian Response Plan were financed only at about 58 per cent. As a result, in April 2021, the World Food Programme (WFP) announced food ration cuts to nearly 700,000 refugees and internally displaced people, who now receive 50 per cent of a full ration, down from 70 per cent.

8. Since the second half of 2020, the Government has accelerated the implementation of economic reforms to increase efficiencies in the management of public finances, including the appointment of new leadership at the National Revenue Authority, which enhanced the mobilization of non-oil revenue, and the promotion of non-oil exports such as gold and gum Arabic for economic diversification. An International Monetary Fund (IMF) Rapid Credit Facility loan of \$52.3 million was disbursed in November 2020, which allowed the Central Bank to resume auctions of United States dollars, although the large gap between the indicative and the parallel exchange rate hindered the effectiveness of the loan. In late March 2021, a second Rapid Credit Facility loan of \$174.2 million was approved by IMF to help the country cope with balance of payments stress induced by COVID-19. Accordingly, the country's authorities agreed on macroeconomic policies and reforms underpinning a nine-month staff-monitored programme by IMF, which included a key decision to reform the foreign exchange market and gradually unify the indicative and parallel market rates.

9. In 2020, South Sudan was ranked as the riskiest country for the spread of COVID-19 in Africa¹ and forecasts of deaths ranged between 408 and 26,740 in one year. This ranking was based on the fact that a high proportion of the population of South Sudan is severely malnourished, with related health complications; the country has a weak, limited and underresourced health-care system, including a near absence of palliative care facilities, and it has a large number of internally displaced people with limited and/or cramped shelter. One year since the beginning of the pandemic, fewer than 150 people are known to have died of the virus, despite an uptick in deaths in the first quarter of 2021. The effects of the pandemic have been mostly indirect in the economic and social spheres but are very severe and pervasive. Children and youth also suffered considerably in terms of education owing to the absence of reliable telecommunications systems and resources for children to access educational platforms. As a result, the provision of education was seriously hampered in a society with the lowest literacy rate in the world.

10. Humanitarian needs were dire in 2020 and remain high in 2021. According to the 2021 humanitarian needs overview, some 8.3 million people are estimated to be in need of assistance, an increase of 800,000 people from the previous year. The main drivers for these needs were related to the high risk of food insecurity, the effects of COVID-19, persistent poor macroeconomic conditions and the impact of flooding on livelihoods. According to the latest Integrated Food Security Phase Classification analysis, conducted in December 2020, 7.24 million people, or 60 per cent of the population, were projected to face severe acute food insecurity from December 2020 to July 2021. It was estimated that, in that period, 31,000 people would endure "catastrophic" (phase 5) acute food insecurity, and an estimated 2.5 million people were likely to face "emergency" (phase 4) acute food insecurity. Some 1.4 million

¹ Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 2020. Available at <https://africacenter.org/spotlight/mapping-risk-factors-spread-covid-19-africa/>.

children under 5 years of age were expected to be acutely malnourished and in need of treatment, the highest caseload for acute malnutrition since the start of the crisis in December 2013. In addition, some 483,382 pregnant or lactating women acutely malnourished need treatment.

11. Humanitarian needs are often linked to fluidity in population movements, including new and secondary displacements related to localized and subnational conflicts and floods, which affected more than 800,000 people for two consecutive years (2019 and 2020), with women and children being the most impacted. A spontaneous return of 1.1 million internally displaced people has been reported since 2016,² and some 360,000 refugees have returned to South Sudan from the neighbouring countries since 2017.³

B. United Nations support for South Sudan

12. There have been opportunities to strengthen the support of the United Nations in South Sudan, but significant challenges also remain. On the one hand, progress in the peace process, together with increased stability and improved access in many locations where states now have functioning governorates, have created conditions for more effective delivery of assistance. On the other, the peace process has been progressing slowly, and the humanitarian crisis was aggravated by floods, locust infestations and COVID-19 and the mobility restrictions to contain it. Some activities had to be postponed owing to the challenges of delivering them. As an example, the Population Estimation Survey could only be launched in April 2021. Despite such daunting challenges, the United Nations country team responded swiftly and in a flexible manner, as manifested in its socioeconomic response plan to COVID-19. For example, the funds for activities that could not be implemented owing to COVID-19 restrictions were redirected to activities such as the manufacturing of face masks and soap and educational programmes delivered via radio so that children in lockdown could continue learning.

13. The United Nations supported the strengthening of dialogue with national partners in the reporting year, to ensure that international support during the transitional period is anchored in national ownership at both the national and local levels. Thus, dialogue between the United Nations and the Government of South Sudan has improved very considerably relative to past years. For example, in July 2020, a consultation event between the United Nations and the Government was held to review the 2019 results and financial report of the United Nations country team and to discuss the type of support that the country team would provide for the remainder of 2020 and in 2021. The event reflected the commitment by the United Nations country team, the Government and the wider donor community to engage in focused and constructive dialogue, under the United Nations Cooperation Framework 2019–2021, which was signed in 2018 and launched in 2019. In October 2020, the Government convened a similar high-level meeting with development partners, which included bilateral donors, international financial institutions, United Nations agencies, funds and programmes and government leaders. The discussions have contributed to the reactivation of the sector working groups which foster aid coordination and collaboration with other development partners. For instance, international financial institutions such as the World Bank and the African Development Bank are active participants in the activities of the United Nations country team in South Sudan and provide significant funding for programme implementation by United Nations agencies, funds and programmes on a partnership basis. The World Bank is funding a

² Source: International Organization for Migration.

³ Source: Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR).

\$40 million project implemented by the United Nations Office for Project Services and the Government of South Sudan on social safety nets, while the African Development Bank is dedicating more than \$14 million to food security through the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO).

14. The current United Nations Cooperation Framework is based on a local approach to implementing the 2030 Agenda and is concurrent with the three-year transitional period under the Revitalized Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in South Sudan. It guides the work of the country team in support of national development priorities and aspirations to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals, with the following four priority pillars: (a) building peace and strengthening governance; (b) improving food security and recovering local economies; (c) strengthening social services; and (d) empowering women and youth. In turn, those four pillars are operationalized in nine flagship programmes: (a) fighting gender-based violence; (b) essential health services; (c) educating children and the young with a focus on pastoral communities; (d) food and nutrition security; (e) governance and access to justice; (f) area-based economic recovery; (g) families returning from displacement; (h) preparing for national census; and (i) empowering women.

15. The Framework has delivered significant results: in 2018, under the previous Interim Cooperation Framework, United Nations agencies, funds and programmes mobilized and delivered \$172 million. In 2019, they delivered \$213 million, or \$41 million more than the previous year. In 2020, the country team's overall development funding delivery stood at about \$203 million. The past two years represent a sizeable increase of 23.8 per cent and 18 per cent when compared with performance in 2018 under the Interim Cooperation Framework. The 2020 results were achieved despite several challenges, including flooding, COVID-19 and the invasion of locusts. COVID-19 related restrictions were particularly detrimental to the organization of events with many participants, which disproportionately hampered activities to empower women and youth, as well as peacebuilding and governance.

16. Following extensive consultations, in late 2020 the country team decided to extend the Cooperation Framework for one year, to 2022, to align it with the country's review of the National Development Strategy. The extension also entails a review of the current core contribution flagship programme for recovery and resilience to keep them fit for purpose, and the design of five new flagship programmes that will run until the end of 2022, namely: (a) area-based programming for returns and displaced persons and strengthening local governance; (b) disaster risk reduction (floods); (c) National Development Strategy; (d) support for peacebuilding and democratic transition; and (e) gender-based violence. Efforts to mobilize financial resources to ensure the implementation of these joint programmes are being taken, for example, re-eligibility to access the Peacebuilding Fund. The United Nations country team has also started the planning process for a new Cooperation Framework due to start in January 2023.

17. A central element of the United Nations work in South Sudan is the triple-nexus approach to ensure coherence across peace, humanitarian and development activities. This translates into increased localized dialogue to foster recovery and resilience in areas that are stable enough to allow the inclusive convening of local stakeholders willing and able to work to achieve progress. Those dialogues receive support from the United Nations and other international actors, which help to organize meetings and local conferences and support follow-up action. Additionally, the South Sudan reconciliation, stabilization and resilience trust fund has remained a strong coordination and transparent mechanism to support the partnership and resilience

agenda. The fund budget increased from \$11,729,287 in 2019 to \$13,093,054 in 2020. Of significance, the United Nations country team, in close collaboration with stakeholders and the United Nations Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS), concluded a peace and conflict analysis and identified entry points and opportunities for stakeholder collaboration and joint programming.

18. The shared support undertaken jointly by a broad range of non-governmental organizations, donors and the United Nations, through the Partnership for Recovery and Resilience, are aimed at reducing vulnerability and building resilience at the local level. These commitments gained considerable traction in 2019 and remain very relevant, despite the COVID-19 related mobility restrictions in 2020. Donors and entities of the United Nations development system are aligning their programmes with the principles and outcomes of the partnership for local dialogues. This demonstrates a more integrated approach to foster sustainable solutions across the humanitarian, peace and development sectors and advance self-reliance for the people. Resilience-building activities, in the form of joint programmes based on locally agreed priorities and action plans, are being undertaken in several locations. Such coordinated support for local livelihoods and service delivery contributes to making people less dependent on humanitarian assistance.

19. Humanitarian organizations reached more than 7.3 million people with humanitarian assistance and protection services in 2020. This represented 97 per cent of the revised target of 7.6 million people through the humanitarian response plan for 2020, including those reached through COVID-19 response activities. As at 31 December 2020, \$1.1 billion was secured against the \$1.9 billion requested in the plan. The large funding gap affected response activities in the areas of water and sanitation, hygiene and food security, inter alia.

C. Outlook

20. A successful transition in South Sudan is fundamental for its future, including the holding of democratic elections at the end of the transition period. This requires progress in three broad areas: political and governance issues; disarmament, demobilization and reintegration of former fighters and security sector reform; and improvements in the humanitarian and human rights situation. Some key benchmarks for the world's newest nation will be achieved through the 2018 peace agreement, including aspects such as transparency and accountability of the public finances system, women's 35 per cent representation, disarmament of former combatants and the establishment of a truth and reconciliation commission.

21. The National Development Strategy review, as provided for by the Revitalized Agreement for the Resolution of the Conflict in South Sudan, is ongoing and expected to be finalized in June 2021. This is important for coherent and coordinated development planning and the identification of joint national priorities. Although the sector working groups were revived in 2020, they remain operationally weak. International development partners could support the review by engaging constructively and building on the momentum created by the peace process.

22. The economic dimension will also be very important, and the stabilization of the macroeconomic and fiscal situation, including the alleviation of the currency and inflationary pressures, would be extremely beneficial for households and civil servants whose salaries are in arrears (it is expected that arrears will be settled with the second IMF loan). The ongoing economic reforms, including the efforts of the National Revenue Authority, are promising and need to be implemented fully – especially those pursuing transparency and accountability. The reform of the foreign exchange market, in particular, may increase the impact of development partners' work, including that

of the United Nations, increase efficiency in the public sector and attract foreign direct investment. In addition to reforms, economic diversification is key and efforts to promote it must continue, not only because oil prices are unpredictable, in the medium to long term, but overreliance on oil also makes countries economy vulnerable. South Sudan is trying to improve the overall financial environment through public financial management and economic reforms.

23. Improved prospects for households to receive basic social protection services, such as better education and health care, should help reduce violence, boost the inclusion of vulnerable segments such as youth with few job opportunities and reduce negative effects on others, such as girls, women or people with disabilities. Protection of vulnerable segments is crucial. The COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated the central importance of basic social services. Furthermore, if a massive vaccination drive to achieve herd immunity is essential for economic recovery, then the impact of COVID-19 in the country may last much longer than in other countries. With a population estimated at about 12 million, South Sudan received its first batch (132,000 doses) from the COVID-19 Vaccine Global Access (COVAX) Facility only on 25 March 2021, and the vaccinations started with frontline health workers on 6 April.

24. Recovery and resilience remain a fundamental pillar of the work of the United Nations. While its effects are difficult to predict, according to the Climate Change Vulnerability Index 2017, South Sudan is among the most vulnerable countries to climate change. Natural disasters such as floods happen frequently and often result in severe food shortages, with 1.7 million women and children estimated to be acutely malnourished. Hence, a new flagship initiative on disaster risk reduction for floods is urgently required.

25. The United Nations country team is taking practical steps to strengthen development support, including through the extension of its cooperation framework for better alignment with national processes, continued dialogue with national counterparts, the development of new initiatives that could be brought to scale, the Population Estimation Survey, the Partnership for Recovery and Resilience and efforts to mobilize additional resources from the Peacebuilding Fund. It will continue to coordinate interventions, to avoid duplication of effort and ensure effective collaboration on peacebuilding and governance initiatives among the United Nations country team and UNMISS. The country team will continue to nurture efficient linkages with other development partners, including the World Bank, the African Development Bank and bilateral donors, leveraging new capacities and tools that are now in place in the context of the repositioning of the United Nations development system.

26. Lastly, the reduction of violence in all its forms, including sexual and gender-based violence, is another fundamental prerequisite for progress in South Sudan. For instance, initiatives that prevent and address sexual exploitation and abuse, such as campaigns to raise public awareness, and the gender-based courts, are welcome and must be supported further.

27. Preventing violence can have very positive returns, by minimizing the high risk of conflict over land and property when internally displaced people and refugees return to their homes after a long time and find new occupants on their land and properties. Returnees from both internal displacements and outside the country will continue to face increasing needs in areas such as food security, social services, housing or land and require support.

III. The Sahel region

A. Context

Sustainable development

28. Since my previous report to the Economic and Social Council (E/2020/65) in July 2020, a Special Coordinator has been appointed to lead the collective efforts of the United Nations system to implement the United Nations integrated strategy for the Sahel and the United Nations support plan for the Sahel for a scaled-up United Nations development response for the Sahel, drawing on all the United Nations assets in the region, engaging and supporting the efforts of the Group of Five for the Sahel, the Sahel Alliance, the Ministerial Coordination Platform for the Sahel, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), the African Union, the European Union, the World Bank and the African Development Bank.

29. Development in the Sahel was sluggish at best before the COVID-19 pandemic, which continues to put pressure on economies in the Sahel, exacerbating pre-existing vulnerabilities, and risking the reversal of Sustainable Development Goal gains in the past two decades. Most countries in the region are facing their first recession in 25 years. According to the African Development Bank (March 2021), the region enjoyed 4.8 per cent growth in 2019 and, in 2020, the average gross domestic product (GDP) is estimated to have declined by 0.85 per cent, while a weighted GDP puts it at -1.06 per cent. Growth performance varied across countries; only Guinea (+5.2 per cent) and Niger (+1.2 per cent) registered positive growth rates in 2020. The pandemic significantly affected Mauritania (-3.6 per cent), Nigeria (-3.0 per cent), Cameroon (-2.4 per cent) and the Gambia (-2.4 per cent). The Sahelian economies are projected to recover to 4.4 per cent in 2021 and 5.1 per cent in 2022.

30. Inclusive growth in the Sahel region continues to be challenged by unemployment and persistent underemployment, especially among the youth. About 43 per cent of Sahelians live below \$1.90⁴ a day. On average, the informal economy in 2020 accounted for about 50 per cent of national output, more than 80 per cent of employment and 90 per cent of new jobs.⁵ This translates into low productivity and vulnerability to shocks, which collectively perpetuate income inequality and poverty.

31. Given the size of the informal sector, the widespread lockdowns and curfews across the Sahel – while necessary to contain the COVID-19 pandemic – deeply affected livelihoods, traditional pastoralist movements and food access, further impacting the Sahelian people. The proportion of the population that could slip into poverty will vary by country and actual estimates may not be known with certainty owing to paucity of data and the fluidity of the spread of the pandemic.

32. The Sahel, one of the world's climate change hotspots, continued to experience extreme temperatures, fluctuating rainfall and droughts, all of which degrade land, change grazing patterns, reduce water supply for animals and threaten the livelihoods of a population in which the majority relies on agriculture for survival. A response to the climate concern is the Great Green Wall initiative, the aim of which is to grow 8,000 km of new green areas and which received at least \$14.326 billion dollars in pledged funding at the One Planet Summit in January 2021. The funding will fast track efforts to restore degrading land and save biological diversity, as well as create green jobs and build resilience.

⁴ African Development Bank Group, *West African Economic Outlook 2020, Coping with the COVID-19 Pandemic* (Abidjan, 2020), p. 24. Available at www.afdb.org/en/documents/west-africa-economic-outlook-2020-coping-covid-19-pandemic.

⁵ Ibid.

33. School enrolment has improved over the past two decades. However, the average number of schooling years remains low, with significant country variations.⁶ Only the Gambia has a primary school enrolment rate of at least 90 per cent. In Mali, COVID-19 created loss in educational achievements, with almost 4 million children out of school compared with 2018, when the number was 1,343,000.⁷

34. The United Nations, together with partners, is supporting efforts to end all forms of violence against women and girls by 2030, including early and forced marriage, sexual harassment and harmful traditional practices, which are all impediments to sustainable development, peace and prosperity. Gender-based violence prevents women and girls from fully engaging in society, costs millions in health expenses, and has long-term impacts. In Mali, Niger and Nigeria, the United Nations undertook intense advocacy on gender-based violence through the Spotlight Initiative. In Niger, 26,265 young women and girls and young men and boys participated in in- and out-of-school programmes aimed at promoting gender-equitable norms, attitudes and behaviours and exercise of rights, including reproductive rights. In Niger, 596,325 people were sensitized to the causes and consequences of gender-based violence and provided with skills to support violence prevention, including 288 adolescent girls who are able to lead community workshops and share their knowledge with their peers. The Initiative equipped 22 basic neonatal emergency obstetric care centres with post-rape kits that helped to care for 1,102 survivors, and 22 Legal Clinics were established covering 300 villages. Over the course of 2020, the Spotlight Initiative in Niger ensured holistic care for a total of 6,531 gender-based violence survivors. In Mali, 139,327 people were sensitized on gender-based violence prevention. A total of 350 gender-based violence survivors benefited from socioeconomic reintegration. A total of 279 communities are in the process of abandoning female genital mutilation and other harmful traditional practices, of which 31 have already done so. In Nigeria, four new laws and policies were developed with inputs from women's rights groups. A total of 64,873 girls and boys were reached through in-school programmes on gender-based violence prevention; an additional 75,268 were reached through out-of-school programmes. More than 2 million (2,157,895) persons were reached through multimedia campaigns on gender-based violence. A total of 10,911 women and girl gender-based violence survivors accessed urgent and longer-term care. The capacities of 673 women's rights groups have strengthened capacities to design, implement, monitor and evaluate their own programmes. In Senegal and Cameroon, the United Nations country teams have established gender and children's desks within police units and enhanced the capacity of 70 and 250 security personnel, respectively, to care for victims of violence and ensure the protection of civilians.

35. In line with the Global Technical Strategy for Malaria 2016–2030 of the World Health Organization and the Sustainable Development Goals (target 3.3), the World Health Organization Regional Office for Africa accessed resources (from Monaco) to provide technical support to seven countries (Burkina Faso, Chad, the Gambia, Mali, Mauritania, Niger and Senegal) in the Sahel to reduce the malaria burden and eliminate the disease. From 2019 to 2020, the Regional Office supported programmes to adopt, adapt and implement normative guidelines, strengthen human resource capacities, improve strategic planning, data management and the West Africa subregional coordination mechanism for the United Nations system-wide support for the African Union and its NEPAD programme.

36. The United Nations supported the establishment of the African Continental Free Trade Area Secretariat in Accra, Ghana which is expected to create jobs and improve

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ World Bank; Children out of school, primary – Mali. Available at <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SE.PRM.UNER?locations=ML>.

livelihoods. Increased demand for goods arising from a larger market will attract investment and create jobs for all. The African Continental Free Trade Area is expected to improve the conditions of many women and youth in the region, given that they account for a significant share of informal traders.

Security situation

37. In 2020, the United Nations Office for West Africa and the Sahel (UNOWAS) continued to support national and regional efforts to sustain peace, in collaboration with regional and international partners, including through advocacy and support for inclusive approaches to national dialogues and electoral processes (the latter with United Nations country teams in Burkina Faso, Guinea, Mali and Niger) and the promotion of human rights, as well as constitutional and institutional reforms. UNOWAS has also been advocating for adherence to the Secretary-General's call for a global ceasefire amid the pandemic. UNOWAS and the United Nations country team in Chad jointly with United Nations country teams in countries of focus implemented several cross-border and regional peacebuilding initiatives with Cameroon, the Central African Republic, Gabon and Niger to address security threats stemming from inter-community conflict and cross-border organized crime.

Humanitarian situation

38. The Central Sahel has remained one of the world's fastest-growing displacement and protection concerns in 2020, exemplified by the number of forcibly displaced persons (in Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger), from 70,000 in 2018 to 2 million by the end of 2020. Persistent insecurity across the Sahel belt, in particular in Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Chad, Mali, Niger and Nigeria, resulted in a sharp increase in internal displacement, which stood at 3,530,175 million persons as at September 2020.⁸ Armed conflict, terrorism and civil unrest continued to trigger forced displacement. Moreover, the environment remained severely constrained for humanitarian workers, as non-State armed groups intensified their activities across the subregion, making previously accessible areas unsafe.

39. While humanitarian agencies have rapidly scaled up to respond to needs across the Sahel, their capacity was severely hampered by lack of funding. 2020 saw the full impact of the pandemic and spiralling needs during the lean season, yet the average funding of the six country response plans (Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Chad, Mali, Niger and Nigeria) stood at 18 per cent. While security budgets across the region were significantly increasing, humanitarian funding and development investments were lagging.

40. Food insecurity in 2020 was expected to spike to unprecedented peaks, with 13 million people facing a critical lack of food and exposed to other disasters. For the second consecutive year, the region had to prepare for a major food and nutrition crisis in 2021. Some 16.7 million people require immediate food assistance, including 9.2 million people in northern Nigeria. About 1 million people face an emergency situation (October–December 2020). The number of acutely food-insecure people could increase to 23.6 million during the next lean season (June–August 2021), reaching a new record high. Malnutrition in conflict-affected areas was at risk of rapid deterioration, and 1.6 million children under 5 were suffering from severe acute malnutrition. In 2020,⁹ 24 million people required humanitarian assistance and protection, the highest number ever recorded in the region. Insecurity and attacks also severely disrupted basic social services, jeopardizing the future of thousands of children and depriving violence-affected people and communities of critical services

⁸ Source: <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/sahelcrisis>.

⁹ Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, *Global Humanitarian Overview 2021* (Geneva, 2020). Available at www.unocha.org/global-humanitarian-overview-2021.

and livelihoods. In 2020, the United Nations provided food assistance to 2.7 million people in Niger, including 1 million people under the emergency component and 1.7 million people under the resilience component. Cash transfers to 580,000 people were made in all regions of the country outside the capital.

41. The future of millions of people, four out of five being under 35 years old, is at stake owing to lack of access to social services and food insecurity. Only coordinated investments in multidimensional solutions can reverse the deteriorating trends, uplift the most vulnerable people in the Sahel from recurrent crises, and create stable conditions for communities and families to prosper. While responding to the resulting emergency is an absolute priority, insecurity makes the delivery of assistance increasingly challenging.

B. United Nations support for the Sahel

42. Within the overarching framework of the United Nations integrated strategy for the Sahel and its support plan, the United Nations has been greatly expanding its efforts to support the COVID-19 response and recovery plans of Governments. Through the United Nations socioeconomic response plans to COVID-19, the United Nations addresses immediate needs and long-term socioeconomic development issues, in line with national priorities. United Nations country teams reported that funding gaps are estimated at approximately 41.5 per cent, with financial resources needed to respond to COVID-19 totalling \$2.5 billion for the region. On 7 January 2021, the Secretary-General appointed the Special Coordinator for Development in the Sahel, to lead collective efforts with a focus on the 2030 Agenda and root causes of instability, to implement the integrated strategy and its support plan for a scaled-up United Nations development response for the Sahel, drawing on all the United Nations assets in the region.

Security

43. The United Nations supported countries in their efforts to prevent non-State terrorist groups from purchasing and trading arms, which are often financed through illicit trafficking of cultural objects in the Sahel. More than 105 customs officials from Burkina Faso, Mali, Mauritania and Niger were trained to monitor and uncover smuggling of cultural artifacts through cooperation with the International Criminal Police Organization (INTERPOL) and the World Customs Organization. In Senegal, the United Nations country team built a police-customs post at the border with Mauritania to help reinforce security amid the pandemic.

44. The United Nations has continued to provide support to the Lake Chad Basin countries by setting up mechanisms to screen, prosecute, rehabilitate and reintegrate individuals associated with Boko Haram. The International Organization for Migration (IOM), the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights and the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, the Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate and the Office of Counter-Terrorism have been addressing different aspects of screening, prosecution, rehabilitation and reintegration in the Lake Chad Basin in coordination with the Lake Chad Basin Commission and the African Union. To date, 260 individuals associated with Boko Haram (45 per cent women) have been disengaged and reintegrated into society.

Governance

45. In their efforts to promote peace and good governance, UNOWAS and the United Nations country teams: (a) strengthened electoral processes and engaged in

the organization of political dialogue between government and opposition parties to support stability during legislative, local and presidential elections in Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Chad, Guinea, Mali,¹⁰ Mauritania, Niger and Nigeria; (b) provided support to the Liptako-Gourma Integrated Development Authority to kickstart its stabilization programme replicating the experience in the Lake Chad Basin in collaboration with regional bodies such as the African Union and ECOWAS; and (c) conducted the first donor small arms and light weapons mapping study in collaboration with ECOWAS. In Mali, the integrated transition support plan serves as the authoritative framework for the coordination of all United Nations system efforts to support the political transition and to strengthen resilience and social cohesion and peace dialogue in the Gao, Mopti, Taoudenni and Timbuktu regions.

46. In line with the African Union Agenda 2063 Migration Policy Framework for Africa, in which it calls for access to accurate information on labour migration, including conditions of employment and access to legal advice in the event of human rights violations, the social integration of West African migrants was supported. In Cameroon, Guinea, Mali, Niger, Nigeria and Senegal, the intervention strengthened the capacity of media to provide an accurate description of migrants' experiences and produce focused coverage on risks encountered by migrants, encouraging evidence-based public debate to change perceptions on migration.

47. On preventing violent extremism through education, a project led by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) supported approximately 8,000 students in Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger and Senegal through capacity-building for teachers on transformative pedagogy encompassing curriculum, school environment and communities. This allowed teachers to create safe spaces for social dialogue and foster empathy, respect for others and pluralism using child-centred approaches. In Niger, the United Nations contributed to the enrolment and retention of approximately 10 per cent of students and directly supported the safe reopening of 3,042 schools (15 per cent) for 454,869 students. The impact extends to the partnership between the school and wider community whereby children contribute to peace and social cohesion.

48. To strengthen ECOWAS capacity for long-term strategic planning, programme formulation and implementation, the Economic Commission for Africa (ECA) and UNDP conducted the Community's 2020 Development Vision assessment. The formulation of the region's new long-term prospective vision (2050 horizon) with a strong focus on governance, security, leadership, regional integration, inclusive growth and social cohesion, is ongoing. This planning will be crucial to the prosperity of the region over the next 30 years.

49. Under the joint regional support programme for the implementation of cross-border cooperation activities in the Liptako-Gourma region, ECA and UNDP contributed to the capacity assessment and strengthening of institutional capacity and reforms in cross-border management by the Liptako-Gourma Integrated Development Authority in Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger.

¹⁰ While acknowledging this progress, it is also worth noting that, in Mali, the situation deteriorated significantly amid widespread protests following the legislative elections of 29 March and 19 April 2020 and culminated in a coup d'état on 18 August and the detention of the former President, Ibrahim Boubacar Keita, the former Prime Minister, Boubou Cisse, and other civilian and military officials. The President subsequently resigned and announced the dissolution of the government and the National Assembly. The protests were triggered by the decision of the Constitutional Court, on 30 April, to overturn the preliminary results of the legislative elections held in March and April for 31 of the 147 seats, mostly in favour of candidates of the ruling coalition (see [S/2020/952](#), paras. 1–3).

50. UNDP support for the Lake Chad Basin Regional Stabilization Facility ensured strong collaboration with the Multinational Joint Task Force, including the establishment of a joint Lake Chad Basin Commission/Multinational Joint Task Force Civil Military Cooperation Cell to ensure strategic civil oversight of Multinational Joint Task Force civil-military activities.

51. In 2020, despite constraints, the Regional Stabilization Facility institutionalized the required governance and coordination structures for the implementation of the Lake Chad Basin Commission stabilization strategy. The Facility proved instrumental in supporting local authorities in affected territories to strengthen the social contract and establish trust between the Government and communities. It also improved access to justice through support to courts and restored local governance restored. In addition, it supported the construction of more than 1,800 infrastructure projects including water lines, shops, market stalls and housing, opened up new channels for cross-border trade which boosted livelihoods in communities. In the Gambia, the United Nations country team supported the establishment of virtual courts at the High Court and magistrate levels to facilitate access to justice and address the persistent backlog of cases during the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition, three remote mobile legal aid clinics at the community level and the prison legal aid desk facilitated access to free mediation, legal and social services.

Resilience

52. In terms of the ecosystem and biodiversity management of the Lake Chad Basin, the United Nations and the Lake Chad Basin Commission jointly addressed the needs of vulnerable populations in Cameroon, Chad, Niger and Nigeria related to climate change. Income-generating activities from the green economy and the restoration of degraded ecosystem benefited more than 30,000 residents in Niger, mitigating the socioeconomic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. In Nigeria, the Hadejia-Nguru-Bade Biosphere Reserve was designated as a site for interaction between society and ecology, including conflict prevention and sustainable management of biodiversity. The effort to nominate the Lake Chad Basin as a world natural heritage site continued with the validation of 12 scientific studies and capacity-building of more than 50,000 beneficiaries on the hydrology and peaceful management of the Lake Chad Basin.

53. United Nations agencies have continued to make basic social services resilient to climate and disaster-related shocks and stresses. Funding from the French Muskoka Fund, the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), the World Health Organization (WHO), the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN-Women), and the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) supported Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Niger and Senegal to strengthen health systems, promote sexual and reproductive health for adolescents and youth and improve nutrition and maternal and newborn health. As a result, exclusive breastfeeding, the number of health service providers and contraceptive prevalence among women of reproductive age have increased. Together with regional partners (ECOWAS, the African Union, the Permanent Inter-State Committee on Drought Control in the Sahel, the Lake Chad Basin Commission and the academic network Partners Enhancing Resilience for People Exposed to Risks (Periperi U)¹¹), IOM, UN-Women, UNDP, FAO, WFP, UNFPA and UNICEF contributed to strengthening regional capacities for disaster risk management in line with the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015–2030 in seven countries of the Sahel (Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Nigeria and Senegal).

¹¹ Consortium of 12 African universities: a platform for advancing university action on risk and vulnerability reduction in Africa.

54. The United Nations also emphasized the strengthening of resilience in the context of COVID-19. In this respect, cooperation with the World Bank was focused on adaptive social protection systems at the country and regional levels, with funding from Germany, UNICEF and WFP, which supported the governments of Mali, Mauritania and Niger in their efforts to counter the effects of the pandemic. Overall, 268,000 households (close to 1.8 million people) were targeted with cash transfers and complementary services in the most vulnerable regions. Efforts were also made to ensure that routine vaccination continued. Approximately 1 million children (aged from 6 to 59 months) were reached with vitamin A supplements, 650,000 children and women with moderate acute malnutrition were treated and received preventive support, and an additional 93,211 children with severe acute malnutrition also received treatment. In Niger, a total of 940,887 children under 1 year of age (target: 967,726 or 97 per cent) received the first dose of a measles vaccine before their first birthday and 649,646 received the second dose.

55. UNICEF and WFP scaled up integrated climate resilience through land rehabilitation in the Sahel by targeting 3 million people, including 1.9 million children from vulnerable communities. Already, 70,000 hectares of land have been rehabilitated across the Group of Five for the Sahel countries. In Niger, more than 19,600 hectares of degraded land were recovered through productive asset creation.

56. Access to renewable energy continued to be a focus area for the United Nations. With partners' support, UNICEF and the Water Mission set up a regional solar technical hub to provide technical support to install solar-powered water systems in Mali, Mauritania and Niger. Additionally, a Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH) Severity Classification, supported by UNICEF and the Global WASH Cluster was developed to systematically assess WASH needs and vulnerabilities. UNHCR supported access to renewable energies for refugees and internally displaced persons in Burkina Faso and Niger, including the lighting of public places to reduce the risk of gender-based violence, the distribution of natural gas kits, solar lamps and the provision of support for land restoration and reforestation.

57. UN-Women promoted women's participation in climate-resilient agriculture value chains in Senegal, Mali, Niger and Nigeria. Through female United Nations Volunteers and the deployment of gender specialist volunteers, partners' ability to support gender equality and women's empowerment initiatives were enhanced.

58. The Global Education Coalition¹² was mobilized under the slogan "learning never stops", to minimize the impact of school closures as part of government preventive measures against COVID-19. The priorities of the Coalition are to support countries in scaling up distance learning practices, reaching children and youth who are most at risk, thus reducing learning loss and preparing schools for safe reopening. Through the joint efforts of more than 140 members from the United Nations, civil society, academia and the private sector, all Sahel countries reopened schools at the beginning of 2021, compared with July 2020, when more than six Sahel countries schools were under closure or partially open.

Coordinated framework in the Sahel

59. The Special Coordinator for Development in the Sahel – whose remit includes coordination of the implementation of United Nations integrated strategy for the Sahel and its support plan – will have a critical role moving forward. While still in the early days of operations, the Special Coordinator is already helping galvanize action by enhancing emphasis on sustainable and inclusive development and driving the coalescing of United Nations interventions in the Sahel towards supporting

¹² See <https://en.unesco.org/covid19/educationresponse/globalcoalition>.

institutions and partners working on development. Scale, impact and national ownership of the integrated strategy have been key advocacy points for the Special Coordinator.

60. The ultimate opportunity for accelerating the United Nations integrated strategy for the Sahel implementation remains in the appropriation and ownership of the strategy at the national level by national stakeholders with support by the resident coordinators and United Nations country teams. The United Nations Development Assistance Frameworks¹³ in Chad (2017–2021), Mauritania and Niger (2019–2021) address integrated strategy priorities regarding governance, peace and resilience. In Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Chad, Niger and Nigeria, the United Nations country teams are strengthening coherence across humanitarian, development and peace activities. Chad and Niger are pilot countries of the United Nations Joint Steering Committee to Advance Humanitarian and Development Collaboration. In the Far North region of Cameroon, where humanitarian needs remain significant, the United Nations country team is implementing the nexus approach in two municipalities: Mokolo (Mayo-Tsanaga) and Fotokol (Logone-et-Chari).

61. The United Nations has developed tools to strengthen communication of its efforts in the Sahel. These include: (a) development of a communication strategy; (b) reactivation of the United Nations integrated strategy for the Sahel website; (c) publication of an integrated strategy newsletter, and (d) creation of social media handles.

62. For impactful results, the United Nations Development Coordination Office has actively engaged resident coordinators on the implementation of the United Nations integrated strategy for the Sahel, notably through its regional team for Africa working with the newly established Office of the Special Coordinator for Development in the Sahel, to systematically mainstream the integrated strategy and the support plan into United Nations country team core programmatic documents such as the United Nations Cooperation Frameworks. A “5W” (who, what, where, when, and for whom) survey of United Nations intervention to date in the Sahel and a rapid assessment was started with the active cooperation of regional offices of the United Nations and resident coordinators and United Nations country teams.

63. In November 2020, the Deputy Secretary-General conducted a solidarity mission to West Africa, including the Sahel, to explore, in consultation with Governments and civil society organizations, how to mobilize support in areas deemed critical to recover better from the COVID-19 pandemic and achieve the Sustainable Development Goals. The main areas of focus on the trip were: (a) financing for development; (b) innovation and technology for social inclusion; (c) food security and the transformation of food systems; and (d) increase trust to establish/maintain strong, just and effective institutions. She visited five countries (Ghana, Mali, Niger, Nigeria and Sierra Leone) and also used that opportunity to highlight women’s participation and leadership in peace, security and development and to recognize the work of the United Nations on the ground.

Perspectives for future work

64. The United Nations continues to strengthen partnerships with regional institutions (Group of Five for the Sahel, the Sahel Alliance, ECOWAS and others) and international financial institutions, as well as global platforms and initiatives.

65. A tripartite agreement was signed between WFP, FAO, the International Fund for Agricultural Development and the permanent secretariat of the Group of Five for

¹³ As of June 2019, the United Nations Assistance Frameworks in the countries listed transitioned to United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Frameworks.

the Sahel to improve rural producers' economic opportunities and livelihood, focusing on women, youth and transhumant pastoralists.

66. At the General Assembly of the Sahel Alliance, held on 15 February 2021, representatives of the Group of Five for the Sahel Heads of State and the Sahel Alliance recognized the stabilization work of UNDP as a key activity to anchor the civilian surge in the Sahel and emphasized the need for an integrated approach between security, stabilization, and development response.

67. To consolidate and scale-up joint efforts, the United Nations integrated strategy for the Sahel issued three offers, on (a) renewable energy; to achieve sustainable socioeconomic growth and poverty reduction through increased access to clean and affordable energy; (b) governance; to stabilize crisis epicentres, promote inclusive growth in non-crisis areas, and support transformational change at the local, national and regional levels; and (c) climate resilience and sustainable agriculture; to transform livelihoods and economies while ensuring food security and nutrition outcomes. The offers congregate the expertise of the United Nations, respond to the support plan and regional priorities and require funding for implementation.

68. The importance of predictive analysis to enhance the work of the United Nations in the Sahel cannot be overstated. A predictive analysis initiative is being piloted in the Sahel, focused on the interconnectedness of displacement, climate risks, food insecurity, increased violence and threats to livelihoods. The United Nations has further plans to partner with world-class academics and national institutions on the development of a coordinated data analytics platform for this purpose.

69. The narrative about the Sahel has to be transformed to become expansive, espousing both opportunities and challenges. This will require working with Sahelians, media and partners inside and outside the Sahel to shift how its narrative is shaped. By joining forces to showcase its richness, success stories of work done and impact of collective actions, a better picture of the Sahel will emerge. The establishment of the Steering Committee on the change of the narrative on the Sahel will contribute to this effort as it focuses on the following areas: (a) growing economy and burgeoning agriculture; (b) resourceful environment and land of innovation; and (c) strong cultural heritage and vibrant youth.

C. Recommendations

70. In view of the situation in the Sahel, it is ever more imperative to accelerate the implementation of integrated, coherent and coordinated support to the region. The Special Coordinator for Development in the Sahel will help ensure the repositioning of the United Nations integrated strategy for the Sahel and the Sahel on the world stage – with a focus on sustainable development – to facilitate the following recommended actions:

(a) The United Nations is committed to collectively accelerating investments, scaling up key programmes and showcasing visible achievements;

(b) Opportunities provided by the demographic dividend of more than 150 million youth under the age of 25 in the Sahel, should be leveraged on sustainable development efforts to create livelihoods and help sustain peace in the decade of action;

(c) The year 2020 marked the twentieth anniversary of the adoption of Security Council resolution [1325 \(2000\)](#) on women and peace and security. A radical shift is required to ensure women's meaningful participation in peace processes, their access to dedicated resources for gender equality and direct assistance to women's

organizations. The effective inclusion, representation and participation of women is crucial for peace and stabilization of the Sahel;

(d) In line with recommendations of the Group of Five for the Sahel Heads of State and the Sahel Alliance General Assembly meeting in February 2021 on the need for an integrated approach on security, stabilization and the development response, the United Nations, Member States and partners should pursue a “civilian surge” to expand stabilization facilities in all conflict-affected regions in the Sahel;

(e) Close coordination, financing and linkages between socioeconomic development, security and humanitarian operations is crucial to mitigate the multisectoral consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic and ensure a coherent and efficient recovery response.
