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Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue

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MINISTRY OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS OF DENMARK



## The voice of youth in the Sahel

### A dialogue between youth organisations and state institutions



#### Anticipating, preventing and regulating migration: prospects in the Sahel region?

Young Sahelians have many reasons for wanting to migrate: the region's insecurity, the hope of pursuing further education, the fear of forced marriage, the search for a job, or simply the desire to see the world. This is not a new phenomenon in Sahelian culture, where migration is an ancestral practice considered almost as a rite of passage.



Contrary to the dominant Western narrative, the most popular destinations are neighbouring cities and countries, followed by West African coastal countries, and Europe at the bottom of the list. However, the dangerous and unpredictable journey to Europe still remains a dream for communities who encourage their youth to cross the Mediterranean in the hopes of a return on their investment. Despite facing disillusionment, young migrants often refuse to return empty-handed.



The exodus of young Sahelians from rural areas is an additional issue. Whether permanent or seasonal, rural to urban migration hampers agricultural development while resulting in increased numbers of unemployed youth in cities.



In 2017, meetings were organised following the establishment of 25 local and national dialogue frameworks across the G5 Sahel countries. These brought together 1,250 youth organisation delegates and representatives from their respective governments to identify potential solutions for the prevention and regulation of problematic migration.



In 2018, the delegates agreed on initiatives to be launched in each of the G5 Sahel countries, in order to respond to priority issues they identified. Youth organisations stressed the importance of prioritising universal and free primary education, vocational training and the development of the job market, while outlining three central areas of focus on migration:



## Facilitating legal migration: freedom of movement in the Sahel and temporary migration to Europe

*'I often travel across the border to do business. And I am always hassled at border crossings. There are too many obstacles.'*

As most migration is actually South–South, youth organisations have called on their governments to start negotiating an agreement to allow for the free movement of goods and people across the Sahel, without delay. They believe that this step would encourage the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) to rapidly implement its freedom of movement treaty, while unlocking the economic potential at a sub-regional level.

Regarding migration to Europe, Sahelian youth delegates have called for an easing of the requirements to obtain a temporary Schengen visa for applicants committed to returning to their home country at its conclusion. Such a 'migration contract' would define the conditions of a stay in Europe, an approach which delegates believe would reduce illegal immigration, prevent 'brain drain' from the Sahel region, and promote the transfer of skills acquired in Europe back to domestic economies.

## Preventing rural exodus: rethinking local development

*'I live in a desert area which is neglected by the state. The only opportunities available to young people here are migrating or participating in migrant trafficking. I do not condemn them; what else could they do?'*

Youth organisations have insisted on the urgent need to rethink and modernise the utilisation, processing and distribution of natural resources. By doing so, they believe that youth could be attracted back into the agriculture, fishing and cattle breeding sectors – which hold high potential for creating employment and developing self-sufficiency in rural settings.

However, this green revolution would need to be accompanied by the construction of road infrastructure in order to connect rural areas and maximise local economic

potential. To achieve these changes, youth organisations have underlined that international aid should pay greater attention to the needs expressed by local communities. Projects including men and women, as well as the establishment of intercommunal mediation mechanisms, are considered essential to the success of rural development programmes.

## Preventing illegal migration to Europe: towards a definitive lifting of taboos

*'Several members of my family contributed funds so that I could leave for Europe. I lost face by coming back and had to find a way to reimburse them.'*

A failed migration brings shame. Youth organisations want the diaspora to speak up about the risks involved in traveling to Europe and the difficulties of living there, to counter the false narratives of European streets 'paved with gold'. Returnees who have been stigmatised for coming home with nothing to show for it should be encouraged to share their ordeals as a means of facilitating their reintegration and discouraging other would-be emigrants. The youth delegates' ultimate goal is to encourage communities to invest in business projects driven by youth rather than financing migrant trafficking.

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