POLICY OUTLOOK

The Forgotten Front: Displacement, Climate, and Conflict in the Sahel

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(Ömer Ürer - Anadolu Agency)

The Sahel has become one of the world's most overlooked frontlines, where conflict, climate shocks, and fragile governance intersect to drive a rapidly expanding displacement crisis. Despite the scale of need, humanitarian support remains chronically underfunded, limiting access to education, health ser-vices, and basic protection for millions. Yet the region is not defined solely by vulnerability: ECOWAS's new labour-migration strategy, local peace accords, and emerging community-led initiatives show that agency and adaptation are already taking shape. This Policy Outlook situates these developments within a broader political economy of neglect and calls for a coordinated Regional Resilience & Reintegration Compact to transform scattered efforts into a sustainable, region-wide response.

The opinions expressed in this policy outlook represent the views of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the TRT World Research Centre.

Introduction – The Sahel's Overlooked Humanitarian Frontline

The Sahel—stretching from Senegal to Chad—has quietly become one of the world's most acute humanitarian and displacement frontlines. Once viewed as a peripheral security theatre, it now stands at the crossroads of conflict, climate, and governance collapse. According to UNHCR, more than 4 million people are currently displaced across Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger and neighbouring states—a 65 per cent increase over the past five years. The convergence of jihadist insurgencies, fragile state institutions, and intensifying climate shocks has turned the region into a complex web of compound displacement drivers.

Yet, despite its scale, the crisis is systematically under-reported and under-funded. UNHCR's 2025 Sahel appeal remains only 32 per cent financed, forcing the suspension of registration, education and health services. Over 14,800 schools have closed, and 900 health facilities are no longer operational, leaving three million children without access to learning or safety. Women and children, who make up roughly 80 per cent of the displaced, face heightened risks of gender-based violence, forced recruitment, and trafficking.

For decades, the Sahel has also been a corridor of mobility, not merely of crisis. Migration has long underpinned livelihoods across porous borders shaped by precolonial trade and seasonal labour cycles. The Migration Data Portal estimates that 7.6 million international migrants currently live within West Africa, mostly in ECOWAS states. Remittances exceeded USD 656 billion in 2023, and 3.7 million migrant workers support agriculture, construction and services. Mobility is thus both a historical adaptation mechanism and a survival strategy—an enduring feature of Sahelian resilience that international narratives often ignore.

This Policy Outlook reframes the Sahel not only as a humanitarian hotspot but as a space of negotiation, adaptation, and emerging agency. It explores how regional institutions, governments, and local communities are attempting—however imperfectly—to govern displacement through fragile cooperation. By analysing the political economy of displacement and the region's new mobility governance frameworks, the study argues that the Sahel's "forgotten front" could serve as a laboratory for resilience diplomacy rather than a permanent symbol of failure.

2. Compounding Drivers: Conflict, Climate, and Governance Breakdown

Displacement in the Sahel does not result from any single cause but from the interplay of conflict, climate stress, and governance fragility. Yet, among these forces, governance breakdown stands as the *structural catalyst*—the root condition that amplifies both violence and vulnerability to environmental shocks. The weakness of state institutions,

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rather than simply an outcome of crisis, is the primary driver that enables the other two dynamics to converge destructively.

In fragile governance environments, communities lack access to security, justice, and basic services. This vacuum allows armed groups to exploit local grievances and translate them into organised violence. Simultaneously, weak institutions leave populations exposed to climate shocks such as droughts and desertification, turning environmental stress into displacement. In this light, conflict and climate stress are not autonomous variables but reinforcing feedback loops stemming from political fragility.

This reframing positions the Sahel's crisis as a governance-centred failure of resilience. The erosion of state authority—manifested through corruption, absent administration, and inequitable resource distribution—creates the conditions for both armed conflict and environmental displacement to thrive. Without addressing this foundational governance deficit, policies targeting only climate adaptation or conflict prevention will remain palliative rather than transformative.

Conflict and Insecurity:

Violence linked to jihadist groups and intercommunal clashes continues to uproot entire communities. The Armed Conflict Location and Event Data (ACLED) project recorded over 10,000 violent incidents in the Central Sahel between 2023 and 2024 alone, displacing more than 1.5 million people. Insecurity has blurred traditional migration routes: once-temporary labour flows have turned into permanent displacement.

Climate Stress and Livelihood Loss:

The Sahel's temperatures are rising 1.5 times faster than the global average. Recurrent droughts, erratic rainfall, and soil degradation have devastated crop yields and livestock herds. For pastoralists, restricted grazing corridors and shrinking water access heighten tensions with farmers. The result is a "climate-conflict feedback loop"—where resource scarcity fuels violence, and violence in turn disrupts adaptation.

Governance Fragility:

Decades of weak state presence, coupled with recurrent coups in Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso, have eroded public trust and service delivery. ISS Africa (2024) notes that "the securitisation of governance" has diverted resources away from social protection toward military expenditure. As humanitarian access narrows, communities rely increasingly on informal and cross-border solidarity networks for survival.

These layered crises reinforce each other: a drought displaces farmers, conflict prevents return, and weak institutions stall recovery. The absence of coordinated regional policy has allowed displacement to evolve into a self-perpetuating system—one where mobility is both a symptom and a coping mechanism.

3. The Political Economy of Displacement

The Sahel's displacement crisis is often portrayed as a victim of donor fatigue or global indifference, but such narratives obscure a deeper structural truth: underfunding is not the product of *forgetfulness*—it is the outcome of *selective attention*. International aid flows to the region reflect not humanitarian priorities but political calculus. Donors have gradually securitised their engagement, privileging border control, counterterrorism, and migration containment over resilience and social protection.

Rather than a shortage of resources, the Sahel suffers from a distortion of purpose. Western governments and institutions frame assistance in terms of preventing instability from spilling northward, effectively externalising migration management to local regimes. In this configuration, the Sahel's invisibility is convenient: it allows donor states to claim stability while outsourcing containment. Aid, in turn, becomes a mechanism of control rather than empowerment.

This political economy of neglect is reinforced by fragmented funding structures. Humanitarian and development initiatives operate in silos, producing short-term projects aligned with donor visibility cycles rather than local capacity building. The result is a form of "humanitarian managerialism" in which metrics replace impact, and crisis response becomes a technocratic exercise detached from the social realities of displacement.

To break this cycle, international partners must rethink aid not as a defensive instrument but as a political investment in governance and legitimacy. This requires shifting from containment-driven agendas toward multi-year funding frameworks that prioritise institutional resilience, local participation, and regional integration. Only by confronting the structural incentives that perpetuate selective neglect can the Sahel's displacement crisis move from being managed to being solved.

Competing Incentives

Governments across the Sahel have learned to navigate humanitarian crises as political currency. Controlling aid pipelines, regulating NGO access, or managing return programmes can generate international legitimacy even for fragile regimes. ISS Africa (2024) notes that the "securitisation of governance" has redirected national budgets from welfare to defence, while simultaneously enabling political elites to trade counter-terrorism cooperation for donor support. These dynamics produce what analysts call a "governance of crisis"—where instability itself becomes a resource.

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Donor Geography and Aid Dependence

International partners, meanwhile, prioritise border containment and counter-migration. Humanitarian funding tends to follow visibility **rather than** vulnerability. As attention focuses on Mediterranean crossings, the Sahel's inland displacement remains chronically under-financed. Donors often channel resources through short-term security or stabilisation projects rather than multi-year resilience programming. This preference reinforces fragmented interventions and weakens the continuity between emergency relief and development.

Implementation Gaps

Normatively, the region is well covered. All Sahelian states have ratified the 1951 Refugee Convention, the 1969 OAU Convention, and the Kampala Convention. ECOWAS has long championed the Free Movement Protocol—a landmark legal instrument guaranteeing entry, residence, and establishment rights for citizens of member states. Yet as IOM's Across Artificial Borders (2019) assessment revealed, the protocol's implementation suffers from weak legal harmonisation, outdated administrative procedures, and scarce labour-market data. Migrants can cross borders but rarely have equal access to employment or social protection.

Fragmented Governance

In practice, humanitarian and mobility governance operate on parallel tracks. Ministries of defence manage border surveillance; labour and interior ministries issue uncoordinated migration policies; and social services remain underfunded. Without a shared information base or coordinated incentives, displacement management is reactive rather than preventive.

What emerges is a political economy of displacement: governments seek legitimacy through control, donors seek stability through containment, and local communities bear the social costs. The absence of harmonised data and coherent policy allows each actor to claim progress while the structural cycle of crisis persists.

4. Agency in Practice – Regional, State, and Local Dynamics

While the Sahel is often portrayed as a zone of helplessness, it is also a region where institutional and community agency is gradually reshaping displacement governance. Across scales—from ECOWAS headquarters to village-level peace mediators—actors are experimenting with fragile but meaningful forms of cooperation.

Regional Agency: ECOWAS and the African Union

In May 2025, ECOWAS validated its Labour Migration Strategy and Action Plan 2025–2035 (LMSAP) in partnership with the African Union, IOM, and ILO. The strategy moves from fragmented national policies toward a rights-based, regionally coordinated mobility framework, aligning with the AU Free Movement Protocol and the Joint Labour Migration Programme (JLMP). Its five objectives—safe and regular migration, rights protection, development dividends, stronger governance, and gender inclusion—signal a shift from reactive humanitarianism to proactive resilience. Implementation will be steered by a Technical Coordination Committee and a Labour Migration Working Group, designed to harmonise labour-market information and support decent work for migrants.

ECOWAS's humanitarian field engagement complements this regional architecture. In October 2025, the organisation launched a joint project with The Gambia and the Gambia Red Cross Society, valued at roughly USD 700,000, to assist refugees, IDPs, and host communities. The six-month initiative delivers cash assistance, solar-powered boreholes, and community gardens while promoting gender equity and peaceful coexistence. Beyond immediate relief, it exemplifies a new operational turn—from norm-setting to direct implementation. These developments suggest that the Sahel's regional institutions, despite their fragility, are exercising agency through partnerships rather than patronage.

State-Level Agency: Fragmented but Emerging

National governments remain constrained by limited fiscal space and security priorities, yet some display creative adaptation. Niger and Burkina Faso have integrated displacement data into national planning tools with IOM support, while Mali's interim authorities have revived local reintegration councils to coordinate returns. Still, political instability and coups interrupt continuity. In several states, displacement governance is divided among competing ministries, reflecting fragmented authority rather than the absence of will.

Local and Community Agency: Everyday Governance

At the grassroots, informal and traditional mechanisms sustain a thin fabric of stability. Clingendael Institute (2022) documents local peace accords in Mopti (Mali) and Tillabéri (Niger), where traditional mediators, religious leaders, and women's associations negotiate ceasefires and access to grazing land between farmers and herders. These micro-agreements, though fragile, have reduced violence in some districts. Similarly, the IOM Transhumance Tracking Tool (TTT), piloted in Burkina Faso, uses digital early-warning to anticipate livestock movements and prevent clashes. Such initiatives show that local agency, when recognised and resourced, can deliver measurable resilience outcomes even where state institutions are weak.

Together, these regional, national, and local efforts reveal a Sahelian governance mosaic: uneven, experimental, and under-financed—but far from inert. The challenge is not the absence of agency, but its fragmentation. Harnessing these scattered initiatives under a unified framework could convert isolated successes into a durable regional response.

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5. Funding and International Neglect

Despite incremental advances in policy and local resilience, the Sahel's humanitarian landscape remains defined by chronic underfunding and donor fatigue. While international attention fixates on the Mediterranean and Red Sea corridors, the inland origins of displacement—where millions first lose livelihoods—receive only residual support.

UNHCR's 2025 Sahel appeal remains less than one-third funded, forcing cuts to registration, education, and health programmes across Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger. Field missions now prioritise "life-saving only" operations, while early recovery and reintegration budgets have virtually disappeared. The result is a paradox: the more local agency grows, the less external funding sustains it.

Several structural factors explain this neglect. Donor geographies tend to follow migration routes rather than root causes. Budgets increasingly blend humanitarian aid with border control or counter-terrorism measures, reinforcing short-term containment rather than long-term resilience. Humanitarian financing also remains projectised, fragmented across dozens of uncoordinated appeals rather than pooled regional envelopes.

Regional institutions are attempting to fill the vacuum. ECOWAS's Humanitarian Department has funded small-scale projects—such as the ECOWAS–Gambia Red Cross partnership (2025)—that combine emergency cash transfers, solar-powered boreholes, and community gardens. These interventions demonstrate cost-effective models of preventive investment: a modest USD 700,000 package can stabilise seven regions and reach over 2,000 vulnerable individuals. Yet such initiatives remain the exception, not the norm.

Ultimately, financial neglect is not just a resource gap—it is a governance failure. When predictable funding vanishes, regional coordination bodies like the LMSAP[1] Techni-

[1] The LMSAP's Technical Coordination Committee (TCC) oversees regional implementation and harmonisation of labour-migration policies across ECOWAS Member States, in collaboration with the AU, IOM and ILO.

cal Coordination Committee cannot function, local peace accords lose institutional backing, and data systems fall silent. The Sahel's displacement crisis, therefore, persists less because of analytical uncertainty than because of political disinterest.

6. Policy Outlook – Building a Regional Resilience & Reintegration Compact (RRC)

The persistence of displacement across the Sahel calls for more than emergency aid. What is needed is a framework that links humanitarian response to development and mobility governance—a regional mechanism that recognises both vulnerability and agency.

This Policy Outlook proposes a Regional Resilience & Reintegration Compact (RRC), co-convened by ECOWAS and the African Union, as a practical platform to consolidate scattered initiatives under a shared strategy.

1. Peace–Climate–Livelihood Hubs

Pilot hubs would integrate climate adaptation, livelihoods, and local peacebuilding in high-pressure provinces such as Tillabéri (Niger) and Mopti (Mali). Drawing lessons from ECOWAS–Gambia's 2025 project, each hub would combine cash assistance, access *to water* (solar boreholes), and community gardens with women- and youth-led cooperatives. The model reframes humanitarian aid as an entry point for resilience diplomacy, where development finance reinforces social cohesion.

2. Municipal Inclusion Windows

Most displaced people in the Sahel now live in towns rather than camps. Local authorities, however, receive no direct international support. A dedicated "municipal window" within the RRC would channel small grants to cities hosting large, displaced populations—funding basic services, registration drives, and vocational training. This would extend the ECOWAS Labour Migration Strategy's focus on rights and decent work to urban governance.

3. Mobility Data Compact

Sustainable policy requires reliable evidence. Building on IOM's Across Artificial Borders and the LMSAP's technical goals, the RRC would establish a Mobility Data Compact linking ECOWAS's Labour Market Information System (LMIS), IOM's Displacement Tracking Matrix (DTM), and national statistical offices. Shared indicators—covering registration, livelihoods, education, and gender-based violence response—would align donor financing with measurable outcomes rather than anecdotal visibility.

Together, these pillars offer a coordinated, low-cost architecture that aligns humanitarian, development, and migration agendas. By scaling up regional experiments rather than importing new frameworks, the RRC would transform the Sahel from a funding sink into a policy laboratory for adaptive governance.

Conclusion – From Crisis to Agency

The Sahel's displacement crisis is not simply the product of war or climate—it is the outcome of neglected governance and under-recognised capacity. Across ECOWAS institutions, national ministries, and community networks, agency already exists: regional labour strategies, cross-border peace accords, and small-scale humanitarian partnerships are quietly rewriting the script of helplessness.

International actors now face a strategic choice: continue treating the Sahel as a humanitarian burden or invest in its emerging architecture of cooperation. Supporting frameworks such as the ECOWAS Labour Migration Strategy and the proposed RRC means backing a future where mobility is managed, not feared.

If sustained and financed, the Sahel could become more than the world's "forgotten front." It could stand as proof that even amid insecurity and scarcity, regional resilience is possible when agency is recognised as the starting point, not the outcome, of policy.

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