

Climate, conflict and COVID-19

How does the pandemic affect EU
policies on climate-fragility?

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1 Introduction

The links between climate change and conflict have been well-documented in recent observations and academic literature: far from being causally direct, these links often depend on specific conditions and occur through certain pathways (Koubi, 2019). For example, conflicts have been found to be more likely in areas with poor access to infrastructure and facilities (Detges, 2016), or where government distrust and political bias are prevalent (Detges, 2017). As such, climate change has often been described as a ‘threat multiplier’, making it imperative for security and development actors to consider these fragility risks collectively in their policies and strategies.

In addition to the expected impacts of climate change on the European Union (EU), such as increasing temperatures, extreme weather events or rising sea levels, climate change also has “direct and indirect international security impacts” for the EU’s foreign- and security policy (Council of the European Union, 2016). These affect for example migration, food security, access to resources and socio-economic factors that possibly contribute to disruptions (ibid.). The resulting fragility may affect the EU by contributing to changes in geopolitical power dynamics, whilst at the same time needs for support in neighbouring and partner countries could increase (Brown, Le More & Raasteen, 2020).

The EU has increasingly acknowledged climate-fragility risks over the last years, as is evident from several key foreign policy strategies, agreements, and decisions. The European Green Deal, for example, aims to cushion climate and environmental impacts that may exacerbate instability (European Commission, 2019). At the regional level, individual policies underline the links between climate impacts and security in partner regions, such as for the Sahel (Council of the European Union, 2021a) and the Neighbourhood (EEAS, 2021a), stressing the importance in tackling those risks.

To that end, the EU has been at the forefront in providing multilateral support for its partner regions, through its various instruments related to climate, environment, development, and security. According to official EU sources, EU funding for official development assistance (ODA) rose by 15% in nominal terms from 2019 to €66.8 billion in 2020 (European Commission, 2021a). Furthermore, the share dedicated to climate action is also growing: the EU initiative Global Climate Change Alliance Plus (GCCA+) received an additional €102.5 million for the period 2014-2020 compared to the previous phase 2004-2014 (European Commission, n.d.). Looking ahead, the EU’s recently approved Multiannual Financial Framework for 2021-2027 is set to provide €110.6 billion in funding for external action and pre-accession assistance to its Neighbourhood and rest of the world (European Commission, 2021b).

Despite the increased recognition of climate-related fragility risks in EU policies and the funding committed to climate action and international development, implementation of concrete measures to address these risks are lagging behind, with only a handful of EU-funded projects addressing climate-fragility risks (Brown, Le More & Raasteen, 2020).

Compounding these challenges is the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite the current vaccine rollout worldwide, and with some countries seeing a potential end to the health crisis, the pandemic has taken - and continues to take - its toll in many parts of the world. The unprecedented nature of COVID-19 could ultimately make it more difficult for the EU to

address the impacts of climate change on fragility and security in its partner regions. In other words:

How does the pandemic affect the EU's ability to address climate-fragility risks in its neighbourhood?

To answer this question, this paper will explore the implications of COVID-19 on relevant EU policies and strategies that address the climate security nexus, focusing on three regions: the Sahel, North Africa, and Western Balkans. These regions were chosen for geographical representativeness (i.e., being the EU's southern and eastern neighbouring regions), as well as being priority regions for EU external action, and, in the case of the Western Balkans, for EU accession.¹

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows: Section 2 outlines, in general terms, the impacts of the pandemic on the political priorities and ability of the EU to address climate-fragility risks. Section 3 explores, for each focus region, how the pandemic affects key objectives of EU policies aiming at reducing climate-fragility risks in that region. Section 4 provides several recommendations on how the EU can better address the interlinking risks associated with climate-fragility and COVID-19.

¹ At the time of writing, Albania, North Macedonia, Serbia, and Montenegro have been granted candidate status for EU accession, whereas Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo are potential candidates (European Commission, 2020a). All references to Kosovo, whether to the territory, institutions or population, should be understood in compliance with UN Security Council Resolution 1244.

2 COVID-19's impacts on the EU's ability to address climate-fragility risks

The EU was among the first global actors to acknowledge the links between climate change and conflict – the connection between “global warming over the next decades” and “turbulence” was first mentioned in the 2003 European Security Strategy (Council of the European Union, 2003). This was followed by a 2008 report titled “Climate change and International Security” in which the then High Representative of the EU Javier Solana specifically described climate change as a “threat multiplier” (European Commission, 2008).

Since then, the EU has stressed the adverse effects of climate change on peace and security in key foreign policy strategies, agreements, and decisions. These include, amongst others, the 2016 EU Global Strategy (EUGS), the 2018 Memorandum of Understanding between the African Union and the European Union on Peace, Security and Governance, and the 2019 European Green Deal (Brown, Le More & Raasteen, 2020)².

Although the EU has recognised the importance of integrated approaches to address multi-sectoral challenges, such as climate-fragility risks, very few projects have addressed the links between climate and conflict on the ground so far (ibid.). Obstacles to a broader implementation included, amongst others, slow implementation processes as well as insufficient coordination between funding instruments (Bergmann, 2018). Furthermore, the cross-sectoral nature of climate-fragility has meant that the topic falls between different EU bodies. Whilst the European External Action Service (EEAS) places the topic under the realms of foreign and security policy, the European Commission considers climate-related security risks as part of climate diplomacy and the policy fields of development cooperation and humanitarian aid (Remling & Barnhoorn, 2021). There also seems to be no joint understanding of climate-fragility risks within the EU and therefore of the concrete measures to tackle them (Brown, Le More & Raasteen, 2020; Remling & Barnhoorn, 2021). Linked to this, no institution has a clear mandate to address climate-related security risks, and correspondingly no budget has been allocated to act on those risks. Moreover, due to the rather long-term nature of climate-fragility risks, the urgency to act is still not felt equally among EU institutions and member states as more short-term needs often take priority (Remling & Barnhoorn, 2021).

The immediate actions required from the EU to cope with the COVID-19 pandemic at home and abroad pose an additional challenge for the EU's response to climate-fragility risks. This section will explore, in broad general terms, COVID-19's impacts on EU foreign-, security- and development policy in tackling climate-fragility risks.

² For a detailed overview of EU policies on climate and security see for example Brown, Le More & Raasteen, 2020, Annex I.

2.1 Higher costs, shifting priorities

The pandemic's toll on health systems and the ensuing economic fallout would mean a greater need to ramp up financial support to respond and recover from the pandemic. Coupled with the impacts of climate change that could add more stress to livelihoods and situations of fragility, the long-term costs to support such livelihoods could become far greater.

Observers have already pointed out that if the pandemic is not adequately contained in Sub-Saharan Africa for example, the humanitarian funding needed for crisis response would be massive (Faleg & Palleschi, 2020). Given that the impacts of COVID-19 are likely to affect fragile regions in particular in the mid-to longer term, there is a risk that without sufficient humanitarian aid, peacebuilding, and development programming, levels of fragility could rise further.

The growing need to respond to the pandemic's economic impacts could also mean a diversion and subsequent reduction in funding for other priorities. Budgets for peacebuilding could shrink due to the pandemic, as peacebuilding has historically been a low priority area among others sectors covered by official development aid (Veron & Sherriff, 2020). Moreover, European development projects have been partially repurposed, thereby holding back several development initiatives – health and education funds, for example, have been reallocated to projects addressing the effects of COVID-19 (ICG, 2021). Efforts to promote gender equality could also face setbacks, with some observers warning that financial support for women in business could be slashed as funds get diverted to address health challenges (Ahairwe & Bilal, 2020).

Whilst the EU and member states contributed more ODA in 2020 (European Commission, 2021c), it remains to be seen if this trend continues or if individual member states decrease their development assistance in the medium-term. In this case, tackling the root causes of conflict and fragility might become even more challenging and socio-economic impacts might worsen. Similarly, for defence spending, some countries have committed even higher budgets to their military, but cuts for national defence might be likely in the medium-term due to the pandemic's economic impacts (Meyer et al., 2021).

One example of this shift in funds and priorities is the EU's **Team Europe package** to support partner countries in their fight against COVID-19. Specifically, it is a multi-billion aid package for EU partner countries to respond immediately and in a coordinated way to the "humanitarian, health, social and economic" effects of the pandemic, while also aligning their actions with the EU's strategic objectives on environment and climate, such as the European Green Deal (European Commission, 2020b). However, the current High Representative of the EU, Josep Borell, did note that the package could not draw on any new funding streams, resulting in cuts to other planned budgets and redirection of funds (EEAS, 2020).

2.2 Delayed targets and actions

The shift in focus and funds to address the pandemic could also mean a delay in achieving the manifold targets of EU external action. This could happen in a number of ways, one of which includes the postponements of important high-level multilateral meetings. Such meetings could be vital for translating plans and strategies into concrete action, or sustaining the political momentum for cooperation, be it on development, climate, environment, or security (see, for example, the AU-EU Summit, Chapter 3.1).

In some contexts, the security and peacebuilding objectives of EU external action could also experience delays and even disruptions, due to the combined impacts of COVID-19 and climate change in worsening situations of fragility and insecurity. For example, government-imposed measures to prevent the spread of the disease have led to heightened inequalities and decreased citizens' trust towards authorities, with possible negative impacts on conflict dynamics (Mustasilta, 2020). Mobility restrictions have also hampered peacekeeping and stabilisation efforts, thus hindering the ability of such operations in meeting their mandated targets and benchmarks in the medium and long-term (De Coning, 2020). Furthermore, the proliferation of armed groups and organised criminal activities amidst the void in peacebuilding and aid support could make these targets even more difficult to achieve (Mustasilta, 2020).

In addition, the pandemic and related restrictions have threatened food security (Béné, 2020) and increased competition for natural resources (Inks & Lichtenheld, 2020), thereby hampering development targets. As containment measures, such as travel bans and the interruption of supply chains, affected in particular the most vulnerable parts of society, the pandemic may undermine targets for greater social cohesion, inclusion and societies' resilience overall. In the context of EU foreign and development policy, lower levels of trust in combination with fewer capacities may hamper the ability of EU partner countries to implement reforms and development initiatives in the future. **In short, the combination of these factors - increased violence, strained livelihoods, the increasing impacts of climate change and fewer assistance that is available for the most vulnerable - could undermine measures to address climate-fragility risks even more.**

Although the pandemic has restricted mobility, it could create a greater impetus for migration in the long-term due to the loss of livelihoods and economic opportunities caused by the pandemic in combination with climate risks (Bird, 2020; Faleg & Palleschi, 2020). At the same time, restrictive border controls could make migration more expensive and dangerous, especially when migration becomes increasingly irregular and facilitated by human smugglers (Bird, 2020). This would put vulnerable migrant populations at greater risk, whilst criminal organisations such as human smugglers could benefit from higher costs (ibid.). Consequently, these dynamics could complicate the EU's aim of enhancing cooperation on migration and development (Council of the European Union, 2015), and in protecting the livelihoods of vulnerable migrant population groups. With a view on climate-fragility risks, higher costs of migration could restrict opportunities for seasonal migration as a means of adaptation, thereby undermining livelihoods and development targets further.

2.3 Geopolitical stakes

The pandemic has had and will continue to have major geopolitical ramifications. One clear example of this is ‘vaccine diplomacy’, which has been used by several countries to strengthen their diplomatic relations and economic influence through the distribution of vaccines. How then is the pandemic influencing the EU’s geopolitical sphere, particularly in the areas of climate, development, and security?

Observers have pointed out, for example, that the higher visibility and swifter mobilisation of resources by non-EU donors to African countries to boost their COVID-19 response, such as the Jack Ma Foundation, have overshadowed the EU’s own Team Europe COVID-19 response (Faleg & Palleschi, 2020). In the Western Balkans, there have been similar dynamics and a comparatively large Russian and Chinese presence in vaccination efforts (see Chapter 3.4.2). If the EU is unable to sufficiently address the potential rise in humanitarian costs in the face of climate change and global pandemics, this may provide a space for other global powers to fill the gap, leverage their presence in partner regions, and thereby increase their geopolitical influence (*ibid.*).

By extension, if the EU loses its geopolitical stakes, this could cause the EU to roll back on its measures and activities to address climate-fragility risks in partner regions, thereby compromising the EU’s own climate-security objectives. Conversely, if the EU shifts more attention to boost its visibility in partner regions as a way to counterbalance the support given by other non-EU donors (for example, by focusing on healthcare support), this could also divert resources away from the EU’s external action in addressing climate-fragility risks. In this regard, the Team Europe approach has been developed with the aim of increasing the EU’s visibility towards partner countries (Jones & Teevan, 2021). But Team Europe also provides an opportunity to address climate-fragility risks and the impacts of COVID-19 while at the same time strengthening EU presence in partner countries.

However, the extent to which climate-fragility risks are addressed in partner regions would ultimately depend on the donors themselves, regardless of who ‘wins’ the geopolitical race. For example, if China were to take the reins in international development aid, much of the climate and security targets of recipient regions could increasingly depend on the objectives and direction of China’s international development initiatives, such as the Belt and Road Initiative (Ivleva, 2020; Li & Ivleva, 2019).

3 Effects of the pandemic on key climate-security policy objectives in the EU Neighbourhood

In this chapter, we illustrate how the pandemic affects key objectives of EU policies aiming at reducing climate-fragility risks in the European Neighbourhood. Focusing on our case study regions, i.e. the Sahel, North Africa, and the Western Balkans, we explain how COVID-19 exacerbates climate-fragility risks and thus undermines current EU efforts to address the climate-fragility nexus in these regions. We begin the section with a general overview of relevant EU policies, strategies and instruments that risk being affected by the pandemic before delving deeper into each region.

3.1 Global, multi-regional EU external action

The **EU Global Strategy (EUGS)** underpins much of EU foreign, development, security, and migration policies. Out of its five priorities for external action, Priority 2 (State and societal resilience to our East and South) highlights resilience in other states as key to “sustainable security” in Europe (EEAS, 2016). In this light, the Strategy calls for inclusive and accountable governance, economic opportunities, and the inclusivity of marginalised groups, especially for women and youth. Another priority area, Priority 3 (An integrated approach to conflicts and crises), calls for action to be multi-dimensional, multi-phased, multi-level, multi-lateral, and to support the legitimacy of institutions to reduce the risk of relapse into violence (ibid.).

Cooperation on climate change and climate action feature prominently in the EUGS: Priority 2 highlights that the “EU will support different paths to resilience, targeting the most acute cases of governmental, economic, societal and climate/energy fragility.” Regarding health specifically, and perhaps highly relevant to COVID-19, the EUGS outlines that the EU “will work for more effective prevention, detection and responses to global pandemics” (ibid.).

The **European Green Deal** refers to climate change as a “threat multiplier and source of instability” (European Commission, 2019), aiming at heightening efforts to strengthen resilience in order to prevent conflict. Moreover, the Green Deal stresses that climate should be considered in all external action as well as in security and defence policy (ibid.).

At the regional level, the EU has a number of policies and strategies for Africa on issues surrounding development, peace, security, and governance. A pioneer strategy that laid the groundwork for a partnership framework between both continents over these issues was the **Joint Africa-EU Strategy**, which was most recently reiterated in the Joint Communication Towards a Comprehensive Strategy with Africa, adopted in June 2020 (Abebe & Maalim, 2020).

The Joint Communication outlined five areas for consideration, namely on (i) green transition and energy access, (ii) digital transformation, (iii) sustainable growth and jobs, (iv) peace and governance, and (v) migration and mobility, while also stressing the

importance of climate resilience, gender equality, and youth empowerment (European Commission, 2020c). The EU plans to turn the strategy into a strategic partnership during the next AU-EU summit (ibid.); however, the postponement of the high-level summit due to the pandemic could risk delaying and even jeopardising the strategy and the EU's overall approach to Africa (Yotova, 2021).

In terms of funding, the Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument (NDICI) will support the EU's external action for the EU's multiannual financial framework (MFF) for 2021-2027 (European Commission, 2021d). Previously, EU funding and investments for external action fell under various, sometimes overlapping and incoherent instruments, which included the European Development Fund (EDF) and European Neighbourhood Instrument (ENI), among others (Gavas & Pleeck, 2021). The NDICI aims to consolidate these financial tools into a single blending facility and guarantee mechanism, and has set aside 30% of its spending targets for climate action (ibid.). It also includes a "cushion" for rapid response mechanism (European Commission, 2021d), following the EU's experience in responding to COVID-19 through Team Europe. However, the commitment of 30% for climate action is a comparatively small amount given the overall funding of €17.2 billion for all of the Neighbourhood and €26 billion for Sub-Saharan Africa (Hackenesch et al., 2021; CONCORD, 2020).

Regardless, COVID-19 could exacerbate the success of the above-mentioned policies in different ways. Like climate change, the pandemic knows no borders: its impacts affect all countries regardless of their socio-economic and political hierarchy, albeit to a different extent. Countries that are experiencing situations of fragility and conflict are hit particularly hard, and these impacts can be summarised in four pathways (Mosello et al., 2020):

- Putting additional stress on livelihoods and resources, and reducing adaptive capacity, which in turn can exacerbate conflict risks.
- Reducing the effectiveness of migration as an adaptation strategy, as COVID-19 measures can increase the precariousness of living and health conditions for migrants and refugees in host countries, while also restricting migration as an important coping strategy.
- Setting back conflict responses and providing opportunities for non-state armed groups (NSAGs), as COVID-19 can impede the delivery of humanitarian aid and obstruct peacebuilding and stabilisation efforts, while opening up new opportunities for the proliferation of NSAGs.
- Increasing the risks in urban environments and for violent protests: the combination of pandemic-related stress and climate pressures might increase the risk for violence and instability, especially in poor urban areas.

3.2 The Sahel

3.2.1 EU policies on the Sahel

There are a number of EU policies that address climate-fragility risks in the Sahel. The **EU Sahel Strategy** aims to foster political stability, security, good governance, social cohesion and economic and education opportunities. The strategy also recognises the negative impacts of climate change on the region and the need to mitigate those. To achieve better development in the region, the EU considers more security in the Sahel as a precondition. The EU's engagement in the Sahel is motivated by the insurgency of non-state armed opposition groups and the need to prevent their spread to Europe. In addition, the strategy states that countering illicit activities, such as drug trafficking, the safety of trade and communication routes as well as economic interests are reasons why the Sahel is of priority for the EU (EEAS, 2011) as well as for the fight against illicit trafficking and transnational organised crime (Council of the European Union, 2015).

The EU's 2021 **Integrated Strategy in the Sahel** explicitly stresses the impacts of COVID-19, environmental degradation and climate change on the Sahel's population. The strategy recognises the potential of these impacts to aggravate pressures and to contribute to new ones (Council of the European Union, 2021d). It also expresses concerns about the stability of the social contract, given the weaknesses of pre-existing governance. Accordingly, the strategy commits further EU support to social cohesion, stabilisation, conflict prevention, and peacebuilding through tackling direct as well as underlying causes of insecurity and fragility. Moreover, the policy acknowledges the links between climate change and security as well as the EU's reinforced commitment to support the region's countries in addressing climate change and enhancing resilience. In particular, the strategy stresses the importance of access to natural resources and food security, and aims for "sustainable, integrated and inclusive development and cooperation" (ibid.) on these resources.

The Integrated Sahel Strategy also commits itself to **humanitarian assistance** along the Humanitarian-Development-Peace Nexus (ibid.). More specifically, the Commission's communication on humanitarian aid explicitly recognises climate change impacts and the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic as factors worsening humanitarian emergencies in general. For its humanitarian operations, the EU aims to address climate adaptation and the environment as well as applying more anticipatory approaches in regions affected by climate-related impacts (European Commission, 2021e). Although development cooperation and humanitarian aid are still single entities, the recent increase of the humanitarian aid budget (European Commission, 2021f) is promising. But it is yet too early to tell, if the rise in budget and the consideration of climate impacts translates into action that would result in more climate-sensitive humanitarian aid.

3.2.2 Climate-fragility and COVID-19 impacts

The Sahel is one of the region's most affected by climate change - climatic pressures, resource scarcity, and environmental degradation are all prevalent in the region (Sissoko et al., 2011), with potential impacts on regional security. Climate projections indicate an increase in temperatures (Monerie et al., 2012) and extreme rainfall (Vizy & Cook, 2012). These trends, in combination with high levels of violence, thereby make the Sahel vulnerable to climate-related conflict. Climate-fragility risks in the Sahel include: farmer-herder conflicts; tensions related to climate-induced migration; disputes over water allocation; and the impacts of climate change on state capacity and the rise of armed opposition groups (Brown et al., 2021). While confirmed cases of COVID-19 infections remain comparatively low, this could also be linked to lower testing capacities

(SWAC/OECD, 2021). The impacts of the pandemic, however, might be severe and long-lasting, possibly complicating EU efforts to address climate-fragility risks in the region.

Stressed resources and undermined livelihoods

COVID-19 can exacerbate climate-related resource scarcity and limit opportunities for adaptation, thereby undermining livelihoods (Mosello et al., 2020). Even before the pandemic, there was a severe risk of a food “crisis” in many parts of the Sahel due to conflict, displacement, disputes over land and natural resource use, economic conditions, and climate impacts. COVID-19 containment measures, such as travel restrictions and interrupted supply chains, added to this daunting situation, contributing to food insecurity. More than 5 million people in the Central Sahel are projected to be in acute food insecurity between June and August 2021, which will leave an increasing share of the population in need of humanitarian assistance (SWAC/ OECD, 2020; FAO-WFP, 2021; OCHA, 2021).

For pastoralists, the COVID-19-related movement restrictions hampered access to water and pasture. Tensions were observed, for example, around water points in Burkina Faso (Hammer et al., 2020). It is expected that pastoralists will experience further security- and COVID-19-related restrictions, whilst for farmers, access to fertile land could also be restricted (FAO-WFP, 2021). The impacts of the pandemic might therefore increase the risk of conflicts between farmers and pastoralists as well as between pastoralists (Bisson, 2020).

Prior to the outbreak of COVID-19, seasonal labour migration was crucial for many livelihoods as a means of adaptation to environmental degradation and climate change impacts. COVID-19-related restrictions, however, tightened many existing movement regulations. Although migration between countries still continued, COVID-19 nevertheless undermined livelihoods as the costs of migration increased, whilst demand for products and supply of labour declined. The effects might strain livelihoods in the medium-term as many had to take up debt or use savings to cope with the impacts of the pandemic, and additional losses are likely should restrictions continue (REACH, 2021).

This interaction between resource scarcity, conflict, and climate impacts with the pandemic’s secondary effects could undermine development targets and pose additional challenges to the implementation of the EU’s Sahel strategies, such as the objective to support conflict prevention and access to food and natural resources. As travel bans restricted humanitarian, development, and peacebuilding activities, it can be expected that progress on the abovementioned objectives were in the best case halted, if not deteriorated during the pandemic. Furthermore, the restrictions on the provision of humanitarian aid and other support during lockdowns could leave vulnerable populations even more marginalised and deprived of means to adapt to climate impacts, thereby undermining access to resources and resilience targets even further.

Weakened government responses and increased opportunities for armed opposition groups

With more than 6,000 people killed, 2020 was the year with the most fatalities in the Central Sahel and the fifth year with rising casualties (Nsaibia, 2021). It is yet too early to tell if the attacks since March 2020 are related to the pandemic, or if the rising number of fatalities is rather the continuation of a trend of increasing violence.

But violent incidents can partially be linked to pandemic-related restrictions. For example, in Niger, non-state armed groups (NSAGs) committed acts of violence against communities

as they did not pray collectively due to disease containment measures (André, 2020). Against this backdrop, ill-equipped governments failed to implement measures to prevent the spread of the virus (Lyammouri & El Mquirmi, 2020), whilst NSAGs exploited COVID-19-related restrictions by destroying infrastructure such as roads and bridges, thereby cutting aid from the population (André, 2020). Furthermore, some non-state actors praised COVID-19 as a “God-sent soldier” helping the fight against government forces and “invaders” (Kishi, 2021). Although the possible links between COVID-19 and the activities of NSAGs need further examination, the interaction of climate-fragility risks with pandemic-related restrictions is likely to undermine livelihoods, and the lack of alternative sources of income could leave the population with no other option than to pursue illicit activities to make ends meet. Therefore, the secondary impacts of the pandemic might increase opportunities for NSAGs further, even though this may only become visible in the longer term (Ackerman & Peterson, 2020). Given the climate projections on the Sahel, an additional risk arises when climate shocks hit already vulnerable regions that are still strained by the socio-economic impacts of COVID-19.

The pandemic’s deteriorating impact on livelihoods, in combination with the risk of future climate shocks and a lack of coping mechanisms linked to weak governance, might have the potential to destabilise the Sahel further, possibly increasing violence in the longer term. This would threaten the EU’s overall objective of a “stable Sahel” (Council of the European Union, 2021d) and the EU’s security more broadly. Hence, it is of particular importance to tackle the impacts of the pandemic in an integrated manner by addressing climate impacts and adaptation in stabilisation and socio-economic initiatives. In the past, interventions were often too narrowly focused on military stabilisation. Given the exacerbating effects of the pandemic, responses need to tackle the root causes of instability and prevalent grievances to prevent further destabilisation.

Indeed, the most recent Integrated Strategy in the Sahel does recognise the impacts of climate change on security and the need for integrated responses. It is therefore crucial that future implementation will follow these principles and objectives, as an integrated implementation of the strategy will be decisive for tackling the risks emerging from both COVID-19 and climate-fragility in the Sahel.

3.3 North Africa

3.3.1 EU policies on North Africa

EU policy aiming at addressing climate-fragility in North Africa and other neighbouring regions has largely operated within the frameworks of the **EU Neighbourhood Policy (ENP)** and the **Union for the Mediterranean (UfM)** (Werenfels, 2020). In line with the EUGS, the ENP aims to help “foster stability, security and prosperity” in countries neighbouring the EU, through political dialogue and other tools, including financial support and technical cooperation (European Commission, 2015). Implementation of the ENP is currently financed by the NDICI (ibid.). The UfM is one of the ENP’s regional cooperation initiatives for the Mediterranean region, including North Africa, and is the “focal point” for regional cooperation, according to the European Commission’s latest joint communication on “a new agenda for the Mediterranean” (European Commission, 2021g).

Both policies outline climate action and security as key priority areas. In the most recent review of the ENP, climate action was highlighted, together with energy cooperation, as an important measure for energy security and a “means to sustainable economic development” (European Commission, 2015). Similarly, the UfM mentions renewable energy, energy efficiency, and climate action collectively as a priority area, in addition to its other sectoral priority areas such as economic development and social affairs (UfM, 2019). More recently, the Joint Communication on “a new agenda for the Mediterranean” highlighted the need to “strengthen and mainstream work on the climate, security and defence nexus” (European Commission, 2021g), signalling a stronger emphasis towards addressing climate-related security challenges in the region.

For North Africa specifically, EU relations to the region depend heavily on a bilateral framework that pursues “political cooperation based on mutual interests” (De Groof et al., 2019). Regional cooperation bodies such as the Union du Maghreb Arabe, which intended to transcend the prevailing EU-North Africa bilateral framework, have not been successful (ibid.), and there is a general lack of regional cooperation and dialogue focusing specifically on climate-security linkages (Desmidt, 2021). However, at the informal level, the **Western Mediterranean Forum** (or **5+5 Dialogue**) has provided an opportunity for North African countries and five EU Mediterranean countries to work together on several shared topics, including defence, migration, water, renewable energy, and environment (Desmidt, 2021; Medthink 5+5 n.d.).

3.3.2 Climate-fragility and COVID-19 impacts

Food and water security

Along with the Sahel region, North Africa has been identified as a “climate change hotspot” (Diffenbaugh & Giorgi, 2012). Climate model projections indicate a general warming of temperatures, which is particularly pronounced in summer (Lelieveld et al., 2016). Algeria, for example, could see temperatures rise by as much as 8°C by the end of the century under a 4°C global warming scenario (Waha et al., 2017). While precipitation projections are less consistent, large parts of North Africa could see a decrease in rainfall levels (Waha et al., 2017).

These climate trends and projections could exacerbate North Africa’s food and water security. Based on climate model simulations, the largest dams and reservoirs in Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia could see a further decline in water availability (Tramblay et al.,

2018). This is a worrying trend considering that agriculture, which accounts for over 10% of GDP in the region³ (World Bank, 2021), has been a major user of the region's scarce water resources. Historically, groundwater resources in the region have been overexploited by inefficient irrigation systems, resulting in a significant drop in aquifer levels (Froebich et al., 2020). This inefficient use of water resources, combined with the projected decline in water availability due to climate change, would thereby not only disrupt agricultural productivity and income, but also contribute to water-related unrest and conflicts in the region (World Bank, 2018).

At the same time, much of this water-intensive agriculture in North Africa is export-driven and in the form of monocultures. This leaves North Africa increasingly reliant on food imports, exposing these countries to the impacts of climate change through international food prices (Desmidt, 2021). Under these circumstances, North Africa's food security is also at stake.

COVID-19 has worsened North Africa's food and water security risks. Transport restrictions have disrupted food supply chains across the region, hitting the agricultural sector particularly hard and driving up food prices domestically (FAO, 2021; IMF, 2020). This is evident in Tunisia, where crop yields such as olives, which are an important agricultural export product for the country, could decline under current climate change projections (Knaepen, 2021). Mobility restrictions linked to the pandemic have not only caused a shutdown of supply chains, but also limited the availability of labour and agricultural inputs, resulting in losses in income in the sector (FAO, 2020).

Through these impacts on food and water security, COVID-19 could negatively impact not only farmers whose livelihoods depend on agriculture, but also the wider population as costs of living (through food price spikes) and health infrastructure become overwhelmed (IMF, 2020). This would make EU external action on promoting regional development and security even more challenging. It could also sideline the climate and environment components of the ENP, for example, if more resources and attention are given to addressing more immediate economic and health concerns, particularly as the ENP's joint priority on security also calls for "stronger emphasis on health security aspects by strengthening country capacities to respond effectively to health threats including communicable diseases" (European Commission, 2015).

Public discontent, government mistrust, and implications for peace

Before the pandemic, the political situation in North Africa was already shaky, owing to a combination of authoritarianism, public discontent, and struggling economies. A notable culmination of this was the Arab Spring of 2011 that saw massive political changes sweeping across several countries in the region, all of which could be traced back to the prevailing dire economic conditions and food price hikes (Climate Diplomacy Factbook, n.d.). Since then however, the political and economic situations in much of North Africa has remained fragile: in Algeria, for example, social unrest has persisted amidst public dissatisfaction with the country's political deadlock and economic crisis (Al Jazeera, 2021).

COVID-19 may continue to fuel these flames of discontent. Despite the regional governments' initial success in managing the pandemic, their less coherent responses during subsequent waves of the pandemic, coupled with economic hardships, has led to more social unrest (Fakir & Werenfels 2021). A case in point is Tunisia, which, in May 2021, registered the highest number of reported COVID-19 deaths per capita in the African continent (Cordall, 2021). In addition to a shrinking economy that has seen unemployment

³ Specifically, Algeria (12.4%), Morocco (12.2%), Tunisia (10.4%).

rise from 15% to 17.4% in 2020, public trust in the government has been waning due to their perceived incoherence in implementing health measures, despite their swift actions at the beginning of the pandemic that won praise (ibid.). These processes have made the country's security situation more 'flammable', culminating in recent protests in early 2021 (Financial Times, 2021).

As these situations of instability arise, it could compromise the peacebuilding and security objectives and efforts of the ENP, UfM, and other regional fora. Regional instability might also distract political attention away from strengthening regional cooperation, not just with the EU but also between North African countries. Experts have pointed out that such inter- and intra-regional cooperation is crucial in enabling the North African countries to collectively and more holistically tackle climate change and other environmental issues affecting the region (Ghafar, 2017).

Furthermore, recent observations in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region have indicated that international aid for peacebuilding have shifted considerably to addressing the pandemic (Abouaoun & El Taraboulsi-McCarthy, 2021). Observers have pointed out that such a shift has eclipsed other more pressing issues that are of higher concern to the local context, and many peacebuilding actors on the ground are frustrated that the attention towards COVID-19, which they consider as a "Western priority", was being forced upon them (ibid.). While these observations are based on the wider MENA region and include international aid beyond the EU, it could serve as a warning of how the EU's response in tackling COVID-19 in the region might be overlooking and/or undercutting funding for other concerns on the ground. This highlights the need to carefully integrate COVID-19 responses (and by extension, climate action) with local priorities (Abouaoun & El Taraboulsi-McCarthy, 2021), in order to avoid unintentionally pulling back peacebuilding and security targets.

The dynamics of migration

As is the case with the climate-conflict nexus, the links between climate change and migration are not clear-cut, being dependent on contextual factors in both the countries of origin and destination (Wesselbaum, 2020). However, for the MENA region specifically, a recent meta-analysis by Hoffmann et al. (2020) did reveal a positive, albeit weak, effect of environmental hazards on migration patterns.

Indeed, North Africa has historically been - and continues to be - an important destination, transit, and departure point for mixed migration (Desmidt, 2021). While irregular arrivals in the EU across the Mediterranean have declined sharply since its peak in 2015, the share of migration across the central and western routes⁴ have increased in recent years (Council of the European Union, 2021e). This could be a particular concern for North Africa's migration policies.

Although COVID-19-related restrictions have put a pause to international mobility due to tighter border controls, the pandemic has left migrants who have been trapped in North Africa in a precarious situation. In Libya, the combined impacts of COVID-19 and conflicts in Tripoli have reportedly exacerbated the vulnerability of migrants and refugees transiting or staying temporarily in the country, through discrimination in access to jobs and health care (IOM, 2020).

⁴ The Central Migration Route refers to migration that transits through Libya (Council of the European Union, 2021b), while the Western Migration Route refers to migration through Morocco and Algeria to reach Spain (Council of the European Union, 2021c).

Furthermore, the devastating impacts of COVID-19 on livelihoods and economic opportunities could drive more (irregular) migration in the long-run. In Tunisia, the economic pressure since 2011, as well as the economic disruptions brought by the pandemic, may have caused a recent spike in influx of Tunisian illegal migrants to Italy (Financial Times, 2021).

These dynamics on migration patterns, particularly irregular ones, could challenge the objectives and priorities of the ENP and UfM in tackling irregular migration, human trafficking, and smuggling. For example, under the ENP's priority area of "migration and mobility", the aims to "increase support for those receiving and assisting refugees and IDPs" and "increase cooperation on root causes of irregular migration and forced displacement" (European Commission, 2015) could be hampered and the costs further heightened, if the combined risks of climate-fragility and COVID-19 are not addressed adequately.

3.4 Western Balkans

3.4.1 EU policies on Western Balkans

For the Western Balkans, the **EU's accession instruments** and its **Strategy for the Western Balkans** are the most important EU policies (European Commission, 2018; European Parliament, 2020). EU membership has long been seen as a way to speed up economic development in the region, strengthen democratic governance, and prevent renewed conflict (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2020; European Commission, 2018; European Commission, 2020d). High-ranking EU officials as well as leaders in the region continue to proclaim their support for Western Balkan states' membership, and a number of negotiation processes have started or have been agreed on in principle (European Commission, 2020d; European Parliament, 2020).

However, despite commitments to enlargement and despite the EU's interest to maintain and strengthen its role in the region, recent progress has not been promising (Brzozowski & Maksimov, 2021a). An internal EU document from May 2021 has pointed to the region's disillusionment with the slow accession process and perceived absence of the EU, hindered by political disagreement, the requirement of unanimous decisions, insufficient progress on the rule of law, and the EU's struggles with growing nationalism in Western Balkan countries (Brzozowski & Maksimov, 2021a). In April and May 2021, a number of unofficial and leaked papers discussing changes to regional borders have led to bewilderment and discontent among regional governments (Brzozowski & Maksimov, 2021b; 2021c). Through the G7 and its own channels, EU officials have sought to control the damage of these leaks, but at the time of writing, disputes are ongoing (Brzozowski & Maksimov, 2021b; Trkanjec, 2021).

This complicated situation is playing out against a background of a number of large financial commitments by the EU towards the Western Balkans. In 2020, the European Commission announced financial commitments of up to €9 billion under the "Economic and Investment Plan", mainly consisting of pre-accession assistance (European Commission, 2020d; 2020e; 2020f). This funding would be in an addition to the €3.3 billion that the region is receiving under the Team Europe programme (European Commission, 2021h). It is worth noting that the public transparency of funding sources has been criticised, with Team Europe contributions seemingly consisting in large part of redistributed funding (Bilal & Di Ciommo, 2020). Importantly, these programmes do not sufficiently take the potential security impacts of climate change and COVID-19 into account. For example, the **EU Green Agenda for the Western Balkans** – the EU's flagship climate initiative in the region – does not adequately consider adaptation, resilience, and potential security risks (cf. European Commission, 2020g). Instead, it places the focus on sustainable development and green growth. While this can help ensure progress towards climate targets, it does little to close the adaptation gap the Western Balkans are facing. Policies strengthening resilience and the capacities of communities and states to withstand climate impacts are needed, if the EU wants to meaningfully address climate-fragility risks in the region.

3.4.2 Climate-fragility and COVID-19 impacts

Climate, political, and health context

In recent years, extreme weather events in the Western Balkans (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo,⁵ Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia) have underlined that attention to climate risk in the region is paramount. Floods in 2014 killed at least 76 people in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia and displaced over 90,000 individuals. Economic losses equalled almost 15% of Bosnia and Herzegovina's GDP, while neighbouring Serbia faced losses of over €1.5 billion (5% of GDP) (Van Gelder, 2018; UNDP Serbia, 2019). Just three years after the floods, the region faced a severe drought and heatwave, requiring energy imports of 80% in hydropower-reliant Albania, as well as causing fires, infrastructure damage, and falling agricultural production in Serbia (Balkan Green Energy News, 2017; Van Gelder, 2018). Low levels of insurance across communities as well as inequality leave the least advantaged members of society (for example, Sinti and Roma) especially exposed and impacted (UNDP Serbia, 2019).

In the future, climate change will further increase the occurrence of extreme weather events. By end-century, temperatures may rise by up to 4 °C, leading to more droughts, further water shortages, and lowered agricultural production (Van Gelder, 2018). Yield losses of 52% are expected for maize at the end of the century, while soybean production might fall by 20%, and sugar beet could already be at risk in the current decade (UNDP Serbia, 2019). Rainfall is expected to further challenge poor water infrastructure, while the expansion of cities and unregulated settlements into flood-prone areas will increase the risks communities face. The region's forests, which provide significant economic value, are expected to be negatively impacted due to falling groundwater levels, forest fires, and outbreaks of invasive species (UNDP Serbia, 2019). While policies on disaster risk and climate change are gaining ground in the region, climate action needs to be strengthened, while investments into green policies and disaster insurance should increase (Piccio, 2018; UNDP Serbia, 2019).

Political tension continues to exist in the Western Balkans. Interstate tensions – especially between Serbia and Kosovo – remain unresolved and internal politics are often dominated by populism, heavy use of executive power, and slow progress on or erosion of the rule of law (Prelec, 2017; EWB, 2020). Most recently, elections in Serbia and Albania offered grounds for concern. Opposition boycotted the 2020 Serbian elections, citing the risks of the COVID-19 pandemic as well as state influence on the media, all amid heavy police action against public demonstrations (Stojanovic, 2020; EWB, 2020). The situation was criticised by several EU parliamentary groups, while Aleksandar Vučić was re-elected as President. In Albania, protests broke out in May 2020, following the illegal destruction of a landmark theatre building. Further protests occurred in December of the same year, following a fatal police shooting during a COVID-19-related curfew. The Minister of Internal Affairs resigned following the incident (EWB, 2020). Elections took place in April 2021, after contested electoral reforms (EWB, 2020; Ivković, 2021a). Just before the elections, two shootings, one of them fatal, occurred and members of rival parties faced off in armed clashes (Ivković, 2021b; Sinoruka, 2021). While the EU and international observers have accepted the election result, reports of misused public resources and heavy media influence have surfaced, and the opposition raised allegations of vote-buying and vote-rigging (Ivković, 2021a).

⁵ All references to Kosovo, whether to the territory, institutions or population, should be understood in compliance with United Nations Security Council Resolution 1244.

The region has been strongly impacted by COVID-19, with heavy case spikes taking place in winter 2020 and spring 2021 (Our World in Data, 2021). In those periods, Western Balkan case numbers were among the worst in Europe (Gadzo, 2021). The pandemic deepened the structural economic issues faced in the region, with projected GDP losses in 2020 ranging from 2.5 to 12%. Loss of remittances from Europe (which amounts to 10% of the region's GDP) and a sharp drop in tourism by 50 to 70% were among the most severe effects. About 550,000 jobs in the Western Balkans are related to tourism, harming a significant number of livelihoods (OECD, 2020). Finally, healthcare systems in the region struggled, given insufficient numbers of intensive care unit (ICU) staff, a lack of ventilators, beds, and medical equipment, as well as poor quality buildings and outmigration of skilled healthcare workers (EWB, 2021). The EU provided support in the form of equipment, cooperating with the UN (UNOPS, 2020). NATO complemented this support (Popović, 2021).

COVID-19 has deepened the climate-fragility risks that the region is facing. These risks can prove challenging to the fragile balance Western Balkan states find themselves in (Mosello et al., 2020; Rüttinger et al., 2021).

Livelihood losses, discontent, and risk of unrest

Climate-induced livelihood and job losses in agriculture, forestry, and tourism can lead to political discontent, protests and unrest, and thereby challenge the stability of states. Individuals might also take up adverse livelihood strategies such as illegal logging, further damaging livelihoods, or choose to migrate (Rüttinger et al., 2021). Civil unrest and decreasing stability of states in the region might ultimately lead to serious conflict – running counter to the EU's long-standing goals of regional security.

COVID-19-induced economic losses, especially in the tourism sector, heavily impact livelihoods, while limited and decreasing financial resources continuously weaken the adaptive capacity required to withstand climate change impacts. While the most immediate impacts have been felt since 2020, financial losses are likely to continue well into the future and affect communities' ability to adequately respond to future climate impacts. Together with existing pressures, significant political discontent, adverse livelihood strategies or migration might emerge (cf. Mosello et al., 2020).

In Serbia, civil rights have been limited due to the pandemic (Stojanovic, 2021), and police violence occurred during protests over COVID-19 restrictions and their economic impact (Stojanovic, 2020). In North Macedonia, progress on policy implementation and human rights stalled during the pandemic. With investments likely to shrink in the future, progress might remain limited (Kacarska, 2021), thereby feeding into political discontent. Consequently, these political dynamics and backsliding of previous reforms could undermine advancement towards EU accession.

Mobility, host communities, and poor conditions for refugees

Migration presents a second potential climate-related challenge in the region (Rüttinger et al., 2021). Outmigration, especially to the EU, is already high among young educated individuals, and climate change could exacerbate the economic challenges that lead to migration. The Western Balkans also lie on several important migration routes towards Europe. This presents challenges to host communities (for example, with regards to service provision and social tension over unequal resource access) and refugees alike. Refugees continue to face poor conditions and abuse along their journeys through the Western Balkans (Pundy, 2019; Strohlic, 2021). Therefore, while mobility and migration should not be seen as security risks or threats per se, they can be associated with different

forms of hardship. If climate change increases migration towards Europe, those situations and the human suffering incurred might well be aggravated (cf. UNDP Serbia, 2019).

COVID-19 disrupts these dynamics. Although individuals might choose to migrate in the face of pandemic- or climate-related impacts, movement restrictions – which are likely to continue in the short term for unvaccinated individuals – reduce the viability of migration as an adaptation strategy. Without this important option, individuals might have to remain in precarious living conditions, and the pressures they face are likely to increase (cf. Mosello et al., 2020). Movement restrictions also impact refugee populations and host communities, as conditions in camps may worsen and individuals may have to stay in the region for significantly longer periods of time than originally planned (Mosello et al., 2020). Refugees also remain significantly susceptible to COVID-19 infection (Strochlic, 2021). Together, these developments might deepen anti-migrant and anti-refugee sentiment in the region and could lead to further populism and nationalism. An inability of the EU to provide support and resolve the ongoing humanitarian situation on its borders can contribute towards further disillusionment with the bloc in the Western Balkans.

Health and mortality

Finally, the impacts of climate change-induced heatwaves, high air pollution, and floods are projected to negatively impact human health by increasing mortality and the occurrence of vector borne diseases. COVID-19 strongly interacts with these environmental conditions, providing a clear example of the additional risks faced due to climate change. Poor air quality in Western Balkan countries is likely to have led to a significant increase in mortality due to COVID-19. At the global and European levels, it is thought that mortality increases between 15 and 19% in regions with high pollution (EWB, 2021). As climate change and environmental factors compound health crises, their significant human, economic, and political impact, cost and risk will increase too.

Although a highly specific case, it is worth noting how the COVID-19 pandemic has complicated EU relations with the Western Balkans. The perceived absence of sufficient EU support during the early stages of the pandemic have presented an opening that Russia and China – the latter of which is already seeking regional influence through the Belt and Road initiative (Zweers et al., 2020) – have been glad to capitalise on. Serbia, which has long been leading vaccination efforts in the region, has received a high number of doses from Russia and China (DW, 2021; Ozturk, 2021). Other countries in the region have been more oriented towards Europe, but domestic pressure and poorly organised procurement efforts have led them to consider Russian and Chinese vaccines too (DW, 2021; Gadzo, 2021). Montenegro and Bosnia and Herzegovina approved the Russian vaccine, while North Macedonia signed an agreement with Chinese manufacturer Sinopharm (DW, 2021). The relative absence of the EU has led many to question the sincerity of the EU's commitment to support the Western Balkans in the pandemic. The first EU vaccine deliveries have only taken place in May 2021 (EEAS, 2021b). If COVID-19 and vaccinations create estrangement from Europe in the Western Balkans, regional security, as well as the EU's effort in accession processes may well be undermined. Future pandemics and health crises are likely to come with their own geopolitical impacts, which could prove challenging to the EU.

In summary, it is in the interest of states as well as the EU to increase regional cooperation in the Western Balkans, in order to maintain economic growth and to further democratic progress. If significant gains on any of these areas are lost - for example, by COVID-19 and climate change - the accession process could be further complicated and endangered, thus increasing the region's disaffection with the EU and severely hindering progress towards

important EU policy goals. This is especially true if concerns over the rule of law, structural reform or other accession targets are side-lined due to insufficient resources or low prioritisation by regional governments. Deepening ethnic tensions or nationalism might cast further doubt on membership. On the other side, a shift in EU financial priorities could spell trouble for the recent promises made under the instrument for pre-accession assistance (cf. European Commission, 2020d, 2020e, 2020f). If the EU fails to fulfil them, EU scepticism in the region may grow further.

In the future, the EU should actively demonstrate the benefits of association with the bloc, and the Western Balkans should remain firmly on the EU's agenda. Pandemic-related support should be swifter and more committed, as it can contribute to offsetting many of the risks that climate change and COVID-19 pose to development, democratic progress, as well as peace and security.

4 Opportunities for improvement

The term “build back better” has become something of a catchphrase in debates on how the global economy should recover in a post-pandemic world. In the same spirit, the EU should leverage the pandemic as an opportunity to reorient its strategy to its partner regions. More specifically, how can EU policies better address the interlinking risks associated with climate change, fragility, and COVID-19 in our focus regions and beyond? As dire as the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic are, the health crisis also provides a momentum for improved responses and action:

➤ **The EU's approach needs to be more integrated**

The Team Europe initiative provides an opportunity to design and implement more **integrated approaches to address climate-fragility risks and the impacts of COVID-19** in partner countries. As the pandemic demonstrated the interconnectedness of risks, joint and integrated measures across sectors and coordinated between the different funding streams are crucial. The integrated Sahel strategy, for example, acknowledges the links between climate and security as well as the impacts of COVID-19 on the region, but now implementation programmes need to be designed and realised in a way that these risks can be effectively addressed without reinforcing each other.

It is also important that EU efforts do not disregard climate-fragility risks in their close neighbourhood. The example of the Western Balkans shows that policies focused on climate change should be adapted to go beyond emissions reduction and green growth, and include adaptation, resilience, and climate security as well. Similarly, for North Africa, the EU should invest more in capacity- and resilience-building initiatives (Brown, 2020), and ensure that these do not compromise democratisation, human rights, and rule of law, all of which are key for long-term sustainable development (Ghafar, 2017). Such an integrated approach is crucial considering the cascading impacts of climate change and the pandemic, but it is also imperative that policies remain coherent and do not undermine other sectors (for example, on gender and rural development) (Desmidt, 2021).

The pandemic also disclosed the importance of socio-economic effects on stability. Hence, stabilisation initiatives should consider the root causes of instability and be more closely linked to development and investment efforts as well as the risks arising from climate impacts. Although EU **humanitarian aid and development cooperation** are still separate, more inter-linked initiatives could better address the longer term impacts of both the pandemic and climate change. To prevent humanitarian aid from unintentionally exacerbating existing challenges, such as environmental degradation and social inequality, interventions need to be **climate- and conflict-sensitive**.

Relatedly, the NDICI is making strides in encouraging joint programming, thereby incentivising collaboration between development actors (Gavas & Pleeck, 2021). This, however, remains voluntary (ibid.). Joint programming should instead be made mandatory to ensure that the areas of humanitarian aid, development, climate, and security (and especially with regards to the pandemic, health) are truly integrated. A

clear mandate for climate-fragility risks within the EU and improved cooperation on the topic among institutions could help to prevent siloed approaches.

Considerations of climate change and humanitarian/development efforts should also include migration, specifically with regards to the situation on the EU borders and along key migration routes (for example, in North Africa and the Western Balkans). Without urgent changes, future movements - compounded by climate change or not - will continue to create unsustainable situations for both refugees and member states alike, and will leave refugees exposed to a range of dangers.

➤ **EU funding for key sectors should increase and be more equitable**

Whilst a quick provision of funds was paramount in the response to the COVID-19 pandemic, budget cuts in other sectors might contribute to further destabilisation. Rather, **more funding for sectors, such as climate, health, and peacebuilding**, is required to prevent the longer term impacts of the pandemic to unleash a downward spiral of fragility. More coordination among member states and with other donors could ensure an effective use of funds.

As the susceptibility of food systems to sudden shocks became evident over the course of the pandemic, **continuous funding for climate change adaptation and climate-resilient agriculture need to be ensured**. In addition, approaches towards more decentralised food systems could help to prevent severe impacts of future crises. This is especially relevant for the Sahel and North Africa, where the combined impacts of climate change and the pandemic proved to be serious threats to both regions' food security. For North Africa in particular, the EU has a critical role to play in supporting the region's agricultural sector and overall food security, given that the EU is a major importer of North African agricultural goods (Knaepen, 2021).

For **peacebuilding**, processes that may have stopped during the pandemic need to be resumed and intensified. More specifically, the EU's peacebuilding efforts should engage more closely with local actors and strengthen their work on the ground, thereby increasing local ownership of peacebuilding processes (Abouaoun & El Taraboulsi-McCarthy, 2021). Relatedly, **access to natural resources** as well as issues of **equality** are increasingly important for stability, and should therefore be taken into full consideration in peacebuilding processes, as both were hampered due to pandemic-related restrictions.

While funding needs to be stepped up in these key sectors, it also needs to be distributed equally across communities and political factions. **Ensuring an equitable distribution of funding and resources** is especially relevant for fragile contexts, as a perceived uneven distribution of human and economic losses could fuel tensions and localised violence (IMF, 2020). In Libya for example, the Western community has historically engaged strategic partnerships with specific non-state actors to achieve short-term security goals, at the expense of nation- and region-wide security reforms (Badi, 2020). Such a strategy would need to change to a more equitable process to ensure that the increase in funding for key sectors reaches all stakeholders and decision-makers on the ground.

➤ **The EU needs to strengthen relations, between and within regions**

If there is one lesson to draw from the health crisis, it is that global cooperation has become more pressing than ever. Hence, **the pandemic provides a chance for the EU**

to improve relations with partner countries and support them in building back better. Despite the forced interruptions that the COVID-19-related restrictions meant for many processes and initiatives, the EU should ensure to quickly resume negotiations that were stopped over the last months, such as the postponed AU-EU Summit. Further delay of talks might undermine joint targets and actions that are urgently needed to respond to the pandemic and climate-fragility risks.

Moreover, accession countries, particularly those in the Western Balkans, require reassurance that they can rely on the EU even in times of crises. Other global powers proved that they are quick in assisting partner countries, and that they might benefit from the gained trust during the pandemic in the longer term. In order to preserve political credibility and underline the seriousness and value of EU efforts, financial commitments need to be fulfilled in a timely manner. If Brussels can strengthen ties with partner governments now, this may pave the way for better relations in the future.

Besides strengthening relations with partner regions, **the EU should also work towards building up intra-regional integration**. For example, the EU could support the countries of North Africa in developing regional solar energy cooperation, which could boost the overall process of economic integration and cooperation within the region. This could enable North Africa as a bloc to speak in a more united voice with the EU, which could ultimately help further deepen EU-North Africa relations (Ghafari, 2017).

In the spirit of “building back better”, **the EU’s policies and strategies towards its partner regions would also need a paradigm shift**. Experts have pointed out that EU development and humanitarian aid should move away from a ‘rich help poor’ or ‘solidarity’ mentality towards a more collaborative and collective approach that strives for ‘equality’ (Chakrabarti & Ezekwesili, 2021; Foresti, 2020). Such an approach would guarantee that the voices of those who need support, be it in the Sahel, North Africa, or the Western Balkans, are fully integrated into the planning and implementation of development and humanitarian aid strategies. Consequently, this will ensure that these strategies are fully embraced by local actors and stakeholders, and that the ultimate goals of climate action and security can be achieved sustainably and holistically.

Finally, the EU should become a forerunner in making the global distribution of vaccines more equal, and should pull forces together to ensure that no countries are left behind in vaccination campaigns. As the pandemic has proven: “no one is safe until everyone is safe”.

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