

Re-prioritizing Assistance in the Central Sahel

Decision-making Support Bulletin for the Central Sahel | Burkina Faso, Mali, Western Niger
July 2025

PROJECT 21



Aid Funding Reductions and Suspensions are Aggravating the Fragile Protection Situation across the Central Sahel

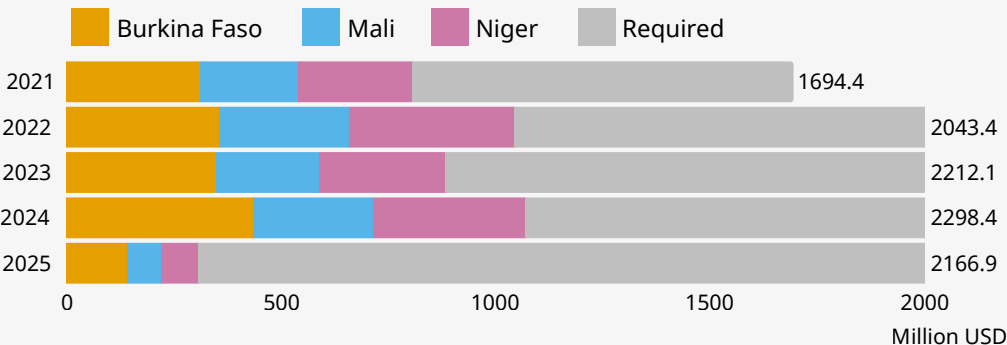
According to OCHA, the number of humanitarian organizations working in the Central Sahel region **dropped by 13% in the last few months** (from 310 in December 2024 to 269 in June 2025). In 2025, the sudden global funding suspensions have aggravated the progressive and multi-factored reductions in funding allocated to the Central Sahel over the past few years. As a result, humanitarian, development and peace-building communities are forced to **hyper-prioritize, downsize and interrupt** their response efforts, leading to **drastic aid capacity decline**. Such funding suspensions and reductions are having a profound effect across the Central Sahel, where **conflict-induced and protracted forced displacement** keeps threatening lives. The number of people in urgent need, as of July 2025, has witnessed a nearly 3 million increase in comparison to July 2024. Meanwhile, plans developed to coordinate the humanitarian response in Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger, are only funded at 14% on average.

Despite limited capacities, and thanks to its **localized partnerships** and **community networks**, Project 21 continues to collect and provide insightful data for informed actions. The 19,359 interviews conducted in the Central Sahel between January and June 2025, more than doubling last year's count, show increasing **denial of resources, opportunities, and services** (incl. humanitarian assistance) and **gender-based violence**. Consequently, affected communities are reporting rising **food-seeking displacements (+15%)**, as well as **child and forced marriage (+10%)**. **Tensions over resources (+21%)** and **pressures on services (+17%)** challenge **peaceful coexistence** between displaced and host communities.

Project 21 findings urge the international community to jointly re-prioritize programming and funding to address, brake and reverse the negative impacts of funding reductions and suspensions. First: by capitalizing on the **favorable legal frameworks** that allow the Central Sahel states to generously host and assist displaced populations. Second: by focusing on **protection-oriented assistance, community & infrastructural investment, national system strengthening, as well as conflict mediation**.

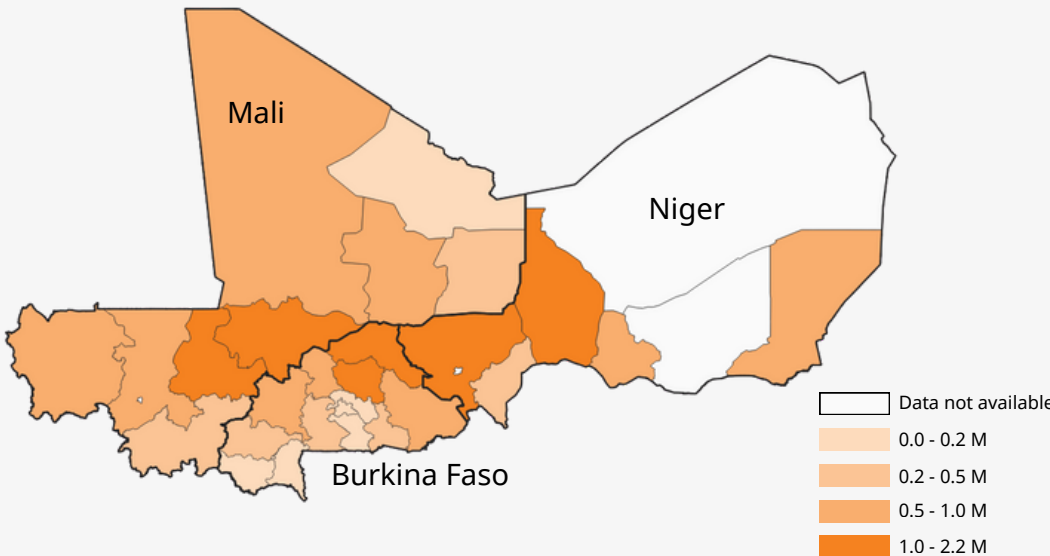
Provided and Required Humanitarian Funding in the Central Sahel

Source: Financial Tracking Service (OCHA)
As of 8 July 2025



Distribution of People in Need in the Central Sahel in 2025

Source: 2025 Sahel Humanitarian Needs and Requirements Overview (OCHA)



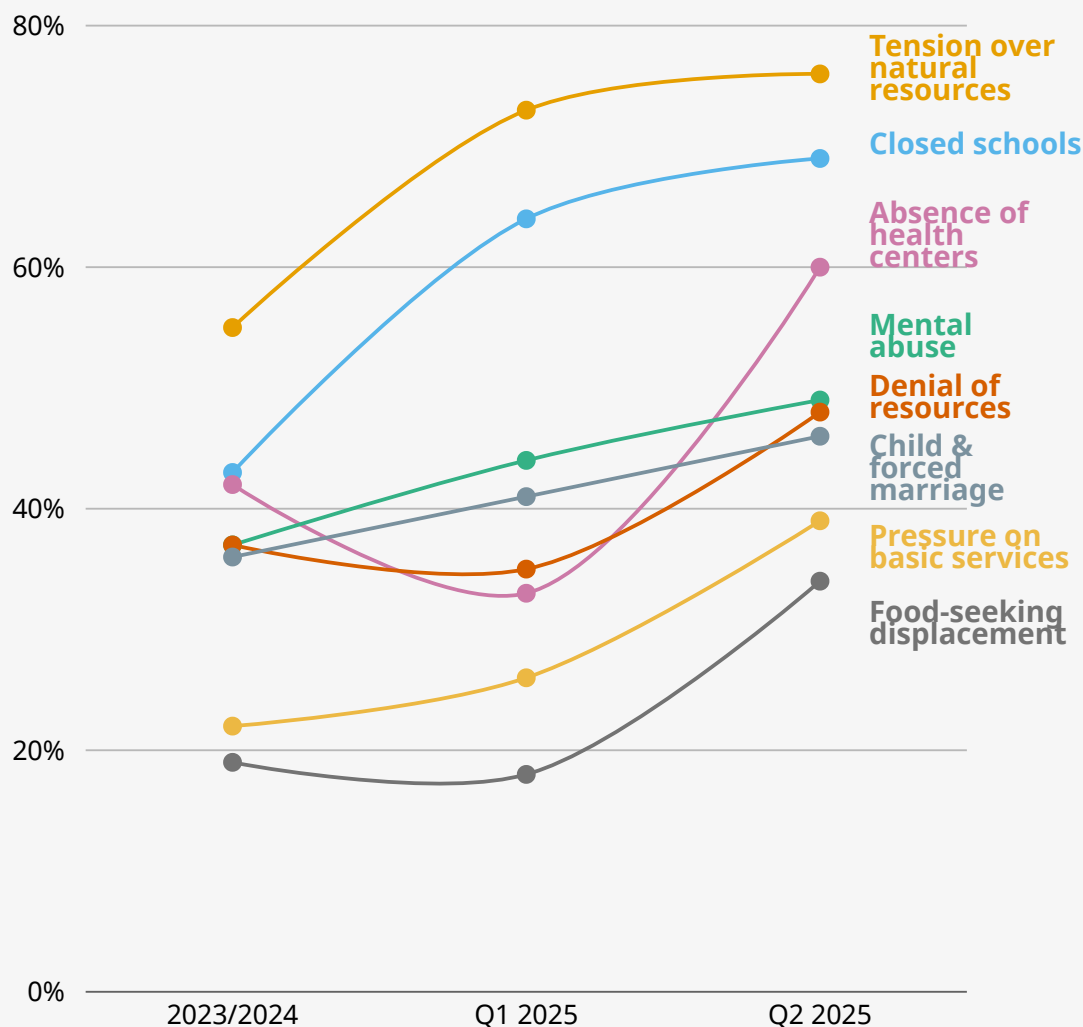
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Top 8 Changing Protection Trends between 2023/2024 and Q1/Q2 2025



- **Denial of resources, services and opportunities incl. humanitarian assistance (+11%)** is the most prominent protection threat in the Central Sahel. Such denials affect particularly women and girls. Combined with increasingly reported **mental abuses (+12%)**, denials also make **gender-based violence (GBV)** the second most prominent protection threat since January 2025.
- Denials disproportionately impact forcibly displaced populations, 80% of whom are women and children. Among them, **child and forced marriage (+10%)** is increasingly cited both as a form of gender-based violence and as a **harmful coping mechanism** in response to deteriorating living conditions.
- Access to education is also severely compromised. Within displaced communities, **school closure (+26%)** have nearly doubled in Q2 2025 compared to 2023/2024 levels, significantly undermining children's rights to education and long-term opportunities.
- **Food insecurity is increasingly a cause for displacement (+15%)**, notably among previously resilient households, as families move in search of livelihoods, exposing themselves to additional protection risks along their routes.
- 3 out of every 5 families voice difficulties accessing health services. Since Q2 2025, the main reason for such difficulty is no longer conflict-induced closure but rather the **absence of health centers (+18%)**.
- Tensions between host and displaced communities could grow in the coming months. Since Q1 2025, **pressures on basic services (+17%)** continue to increase, fueling frustration and rivalry on already overstretched services, as aid continues to diminish.
- Tensions over natural resources remain a persistent obstacle to displaced communities' feeling of integration. As the lean season has already started in June, **disputes over land, water and firewood (+21%)** are likely to intensify, further weakening social cohesion and increasing risks for already vulnerable groups

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Recommendations

Contact Project 21 to obtain detailed tables and maps outlining key regions and provinces to help re-prioritize your programming and funding efforts

For Humanitarian Actors

- **Ensure evidence-based and targeted life-saving assistance** applying a systematic age, gender, displacement status (IDPs, refugees, returnees) approach. Prioritize persons with special needs such as separated children, pregnant women, and persons with disabilities.
- **Strengthen GBV prevention and case management capacities**, with a specific focus on child and forced marriage, psychosocial support, and the protection of women and girls in both host and displaced communities.
- **Prioritize child protection in displaced communities** where risks of early marriage, exploitation, trafficking, recruitment in armed groups are heightened by school closures.
- **Address food insecurity** through integrated food assistance and mobile distributions in hard-to-reach areas and/or recent places of arrival.

For Development Actors

- **Invest in sustainable logistical infrastructure** such as roads and bridges to reinforce affected communities' capacities to effectively access basic social services.
- **Reinforce and expand basic social services** incl. water points, civil registration, health centers and schools, particularly in displacement-affected areas to ensure local service delivery, facilitate and sustain humanitarian interventions.
- **Guarantee equitable land access and tenure** to enable displaced populations' inclusion and self-reliance, rebuild agropastoral livelihood, prevent and mitigate land-related tensions.
- **Promote livelihood and vocational training programs** tailored to the special needs of women, youth, and displaced persons to strengthen long-term resilience and reduce negative coping strategies.

For Peacebuilding Actors

- **Support local mediation and community-based conflict resolution mechanisms**, working with traditional leaders, youth and women associations, refugee-led organizations, through the provision of training and logistical support.
- **Promote inclusive community dialogue**, ensuring meaningful participation of women, youth, and displaced populations in local governance, planning, and peacebuilding initiatives.
- **Establish early-warning systems to prevent conflicts over resources and services** between displaced and host communities, prioritizing areas most affected by natural disasters and forced displacement.

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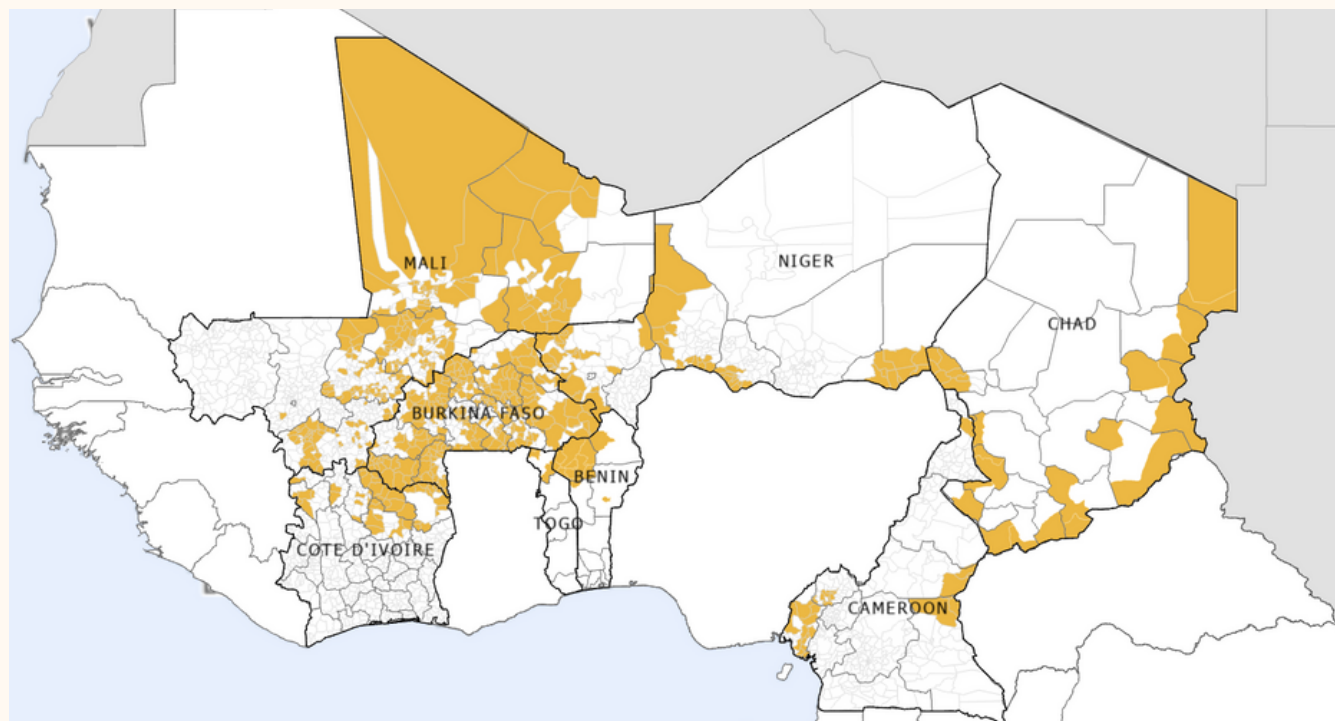
About Project 21

Project 21 is a **cross-border, inter-agency and regional protection monitoring system**. Based on a standardized methodology and harmonized tools, Project 21 continuously surveys communities affected by **forced displacement, insecurity, and conflict**. Working through existing platforms and dedicated coordination groups, we partner with **more than 30** organizations, amongst which two thirds are local and national ones, to collect, analyze, and disseminate protection data. Since 2021, Project 21 has contributed to merge **18 different protection monitoring systems** deployed in the Central Sahel and has addressed gaps in data collection and analysis.

Advancing the centrality of **protection** across the Humanitarian, Development and Peace Nexus, Project 21 transforms affected communities' voices into informed **strategies, programs and actions**. Since 2021, Project 21 monitors have conducted **nearly 200,000 interviews** in Benin, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Central African Republic, Chad, Ivory Coast, Mali, Niger and Togo. In 2025, Project 21 strives and succeeds to maintain its presence in **West and Central Africa's** major forced displacement situations: (i) the Central Sahel; (ii) the Lake Chad Basin; (iii) the Sudanese Emergency in Chad; (iv) the Gulf of Guinea's Coastal Countries.

Project 21 collects, analyses and disseminates data on the the situation of communities affected by forced displacement, through consultations with households and key informants. Project 21 data is analyzed by dedicated analysis groups established at the regional and national levels. The conclusions presented in this document reflect only the situations of the interviewed individuals, households and communities in the areas and the period covered.

Overview of Project 21's geographic coverage | As of 2025



Towards a regional reference framework for protection data

2020 - 2022

- Launch of Project 21 as a pilot project.
- Development of harmonized tools and methodologies.
- Deployment in Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger, Lake Chad Province.

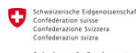
2022 - 2025

- Deployment of dedicated field teams.
- Extension in Benin, Chad, CAR, Cameroon, Côte d'Ivoire and Togo.
- Conduction of an External Mid-Term Review.

2025 - 2027

- Consolidation of Project 21 as West and Central Africa's Reference Protection Data Framework.
- Enhanced contributions to the Localization and Inclusion Agendas.

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